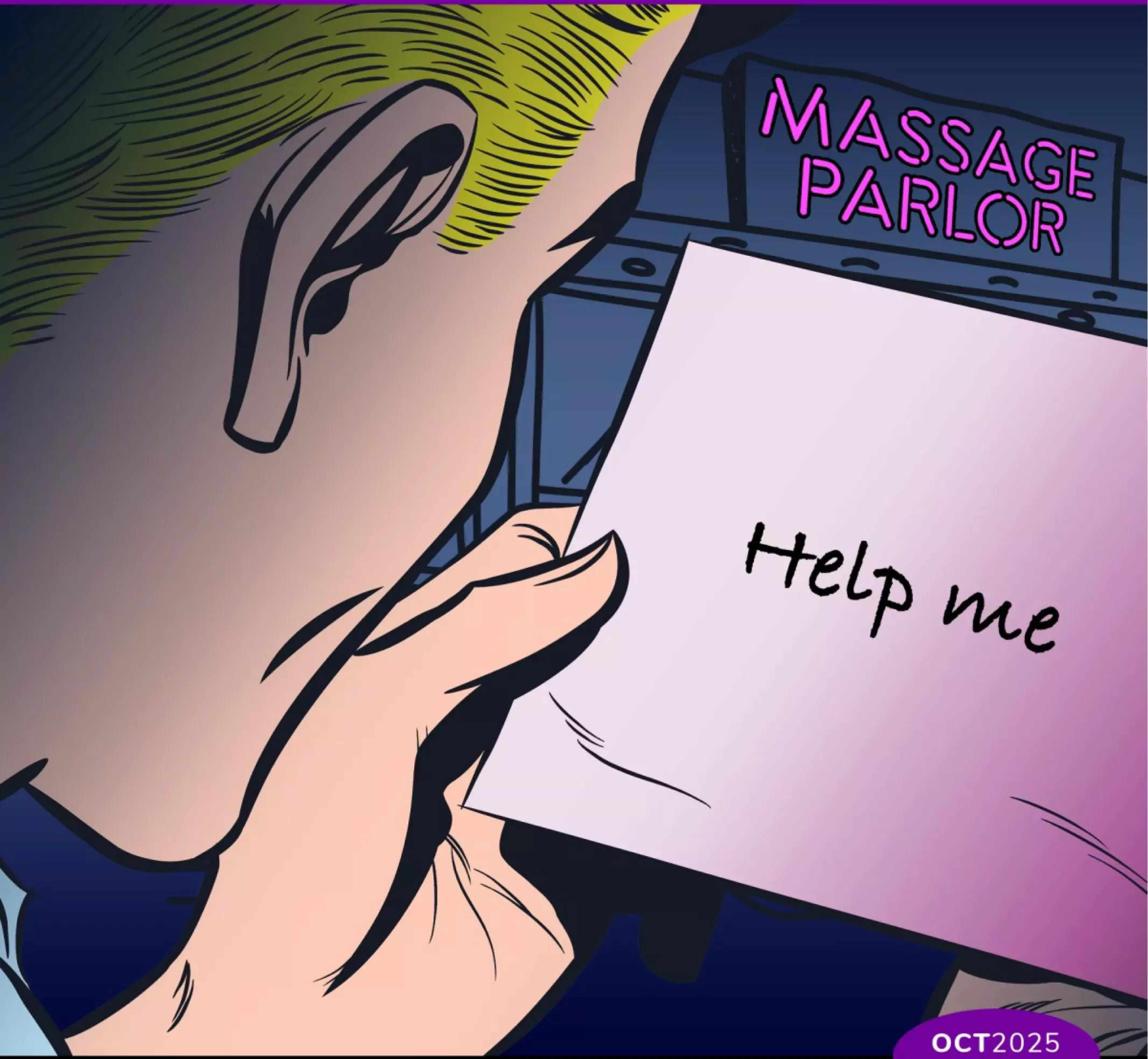
AFTER DINNER
Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Literary Magazine



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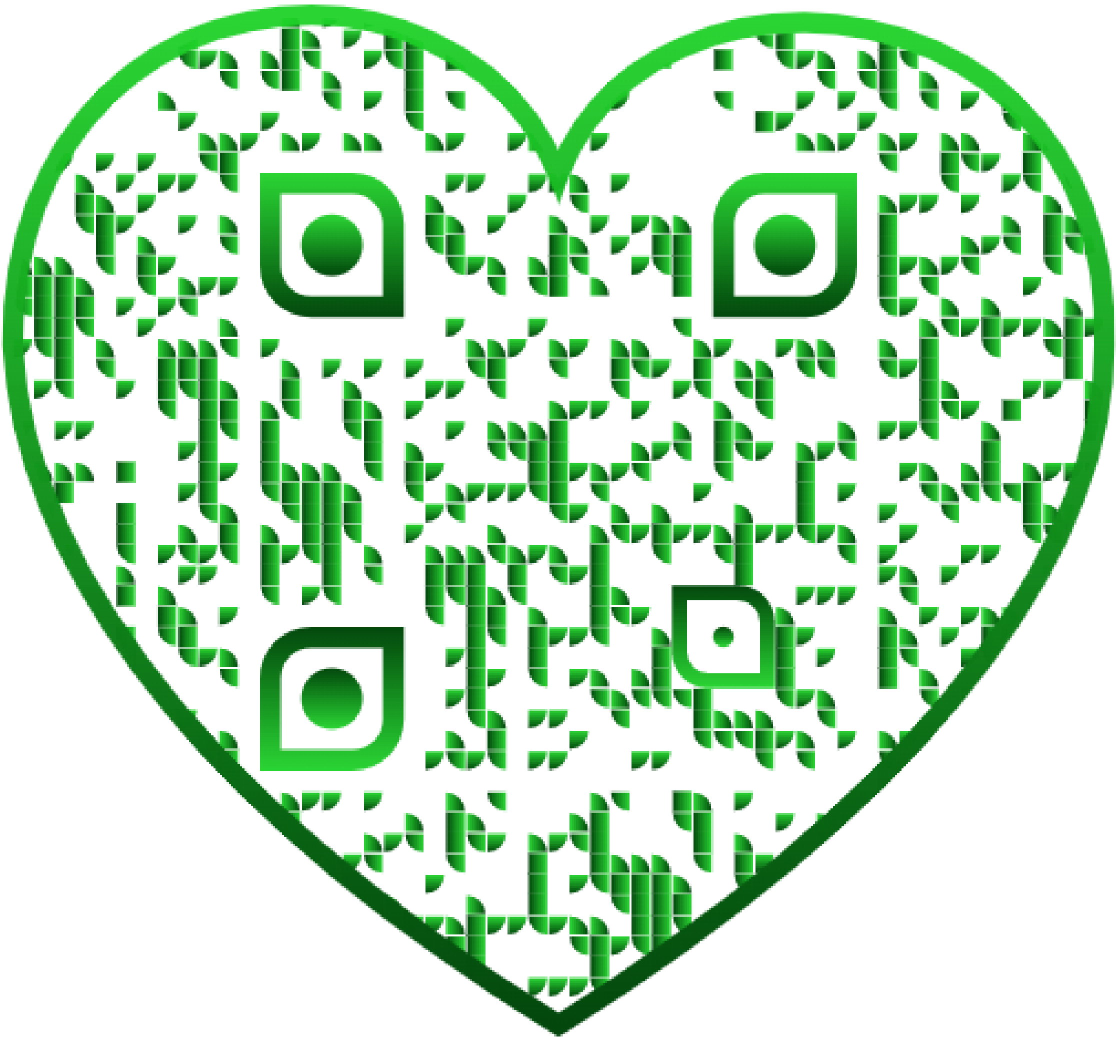

After Dinner Conversation Magazine – October 2025

This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The magazine is published monthly in print and electronic format.

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Editor in Chief: *Kolby Granville*
Story Editor: *R.K.H. Ndong*
Copy Editors: *Stephen Repsys & Kate Bocassi*
Cover Design: *Shawn Winchester*
Design, layout, and discussion questions by After Dinner Conversation.

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After Dinner Conversation *is an award-winning independent nonprofit publisher. We believe in fostering meaningful discussions among friends, family, and students to enhance humanity through truth-seeking, reflection, and respectful debate. To achieve this, we publish philosophical and ethical short story fiction accompanied by discussion questions.*

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From the Editor

It was never a literary magazine. It has always been a tool, disguised as a literary magazine. *After Dinner Conversation's* 2019 founding was in response to the barrage of internet trolls; to instead give people a tool for thoughtful conversations and allow for a meta-analysis of values.

As such, I'm proud to announce our next phase: facilitating After Dinner Conversations around the world. So, here's my pitch…

Invite some friends to your home one night and send them an *After Dinner Conversation* story or two beforehand as prereading. Eat, drink, and discuss. Build meaning together.

Do you work with a school, library, church group, or a book club? Same thing. Don't feel comfortable leading a discussion? I'm happy to video conference in to facilitate discussions. I hope some day to be so overwhelmed with requests we have to start training facilitators.

Also, we are now hosting our own monthly story conversations. You can join these conversations via our website.

The point is, you should consider this magazine the tool, not the final product. The final product is thoughtful conversation. The magazine, the stories, and the discussion questions are just the tool to get you there.

Happy readings and happy discussions!

Kolby Granville – Editor

A Plaintive Note

Vern Bryk

* * *

Content Disclosure: Sexual Situations; Mild Language

* * *

Kyle had no reason to suspect that his after-work detour to the massage parlor would be any different than before. And initially it wasn’t. It had become a regular thing, like going to the barber. He told his wife, Dawn, he needed to work a bit of overtime at the office, and she accepted it as she always had.

He didn’t feel like he was cheating on her because there was no romantic involvement. It was just a service, like a haircut. And, like many men, including a president, Kyle believed that it wasn’t really sex without copulation, and that it wasn’t really infidelity without sex.

His first visit felt like an adventure, full of uncertainty and apprehension. The conversation was awkward. As a first-timer, he didn’t understand that he had to ask for it. The cops can’t arrest them for solicitation when the customer makes the offer. Once Kyle understood the protocol, it went more smoothly, and

Dawn never minded him coming home late. The perfunctorily performed service became an uneventful routine.

Until today.

It was a dreary day in late March. The visit started out like any other. As always, he parked in the back, out of view. Upon entering the premises, he received the usual terse greeting from the familiar surly receptionist, a stout, older woman who watched the rerun channel on a small television. He also recognized the familiar smell of the place, a strange stew of scented oils, air freshener, mildew, and insecticide.

He was directed to a room that he'd been in many times before. It had the same harsh fluorescent lighting. Same grimy walls and ceiling stained from water leaks. The same hard, uncomfortable massage table whose fake leather surface was cracked and peeling, giving it a scratchy feel.

There wasn't much else in the room. A small shelf table held a pump dispenser of massage oil and a roll of paper towels.

The woman attending him was one he'd had often before. He recognized her face but didn't know her name. She was ordinary looking. Nondescript. Or maybe that's the way he preferred to see her. Like a cashier in the grocery store. Just someone who's there. Preferably without a name tag.

He noticed a large bruise around her right eye but didn't think about it for more than a second. Maybe she walked into the edge of a door or fell. Accidents happen.

She asked the customary prefatory questions in a foreign accent he could not place. Then he undressed. She took his clothes, folded them neatly, and placed them on the small shelf table.

Her hands on his body felt the same as before, except that they were cold and seemed to tremble. Otherwise, the service unfolded in its usual pattern. He got what he came for. Then she cleaned him up.

As usual, there was minimal conversation. What really can you say? What exactly would you want to hear? The silence was mutually convenient. We aren't really here doing this. We are somewhere else. Any talk would just pull us back here.

Her typical parting words were something like "see you again." Only this time they were different. She asked him a question. She uttered it softly with a plaintive note.

"Is it spring yet?"

The query shook him, as it was one that could only be posed by a prisoner. Someone stuck in a windowless cell and not allowed out for air. The implication was so terrifying, he pretended not to hear it. Tried to unhear it.

He rushed out the door, as if being pursued. He quickly started the car and roared out into traffic so fast he almost caused a collision. He was trembling and breathing heavily. He needed to calm down to properly drive. But other questions now pricked him into a state of agitation. The obvious one topped the list.

Am I complicit?

Fueling that is the ivory argument. Buy ivory, kill an elephant. That's because the purchase of something made of ivory increases the demand for ivory that can only be met by killing more elephants. In a similar fashion, purchasing the services of sex workers increases the demand for them. Both kinds. Those who voluntarily pursue the trade, and those who are forced into it.

Countering that is the cigarette argument. Cigarettes kill people. Lots of people. So, am I an accomplice to murder by buying a pack of cigarettes? Of course not. That's because society permits the sale of cigarettes. Therefore, society has sanctioned the killing.

So, yes, some massage parlors may engage in sex trafficking, but everyone knows this, and no one does anything about it. No one investigates them. These places are not hidden from view. They are out on the main thoroughfares with bright, flashing lights. Government and law enforcement agencies are well aware of them. The newspaper gleefully accepts their advertising, thereby conferring a de facto endorsement.

Society has chosen to look away, and indifference signifies approval. So, the customers are not responsible for what happens in these establishments. Society is at fault.

In fact, you can argue that the customers are really the ones being taken advantage of. They're the ones whose weaknesses are exploited. They're the ones being lured by salacious advertising. They're the ones who leave the encounter with a lighter wallet. They're the real victims.

Yes, absolutely, Kyle thought. I am the victim here. And society is to blame.

He then felt relieved by his reasoning. In any event, there was nothing he personally could do about the whole situation anyway. So, follow the Serenity Prayer's advice. Forget about things you have no control over.

By the time he got home, he had calmed down. He'd resolved his disturbance. Neutralized his misgivings. There was nothing to worry about. That's just life. You need to carry on.

Dinner will be ready soon. And Dawn always cooked up something good.

He decided to change his pants before dinner, just in case they showed some evidence of his after-work diversion. While emptying his pockets, he carelessly tossed their contents on the dresser, and his overstuffed wallet knocked over a ceramic coffee mug Dawn kept there. He righted the mug and restored its contents, a comb, a nail file, and other odds and ends.

It was one of those mugs inscribed with a thoughtful saying. The shortcoming of such ceramic sagacity is that one reflects upon the message exactly once. Thereafter, it recedes into the visual backdrop and goes unnoticed, like the pattern in wallpaper.

The only reason he scrutinized the mug now was to determine its original orientation. One side of the mug displayed the image of a frog staring at you with a mischievous look. The other side, an advisory.

Life is a frog.
It sits still for a long time,
Then suddenly leaps
To a new place.
It's getting froggy out.
Are you ready?

As he repositioned the mug, he noticed something odd next to it, something withdrawn from his pockets and now resting on some loose change. It was a paper towel, neatly folded into a small square. At first, he had no idea how it might have gotten into his pocket.

He took a closer look at it and was quietly jolted into a cold panic. The pinkish floral pattern on the paper towel was the same as the one he'd just seen at the massage parlor.

The mysterious object before him had somehow broken out of his secret world and invaded his home world. It wasn't possible. But there it was. And the ominous item could not have gotten into his pocket accidentally. The way it was folded into a small square, like a secret note. She had put it there. The woman at the massage parlor. The woman whose name he did not know because he never asked.

His first thought—get rid of it. Immediately. Don't open it. Just flush it down the toilet. Do it now. Right now. The command from his head was loud and clear, yet his body failed to obey. He stood frozen, staring at the note, his eyes wide in terror. His brain was now screaming at him. Move! Flush it! Do it now! Right now!

And then another voice, this one real. His wife, Dawn, calling up the stairs and announcing that dinner was ready. Now he had to do something, one way or the other.

He quickly changed pants. Then he grabbed the note and walked swiftly over to the bathroom. Just as he was about to toss it into the toilet, his thoughts were once again pierced by the haunting question posed at the massage parlor.

"Is it spring yet?"

Freezing again momentarily, he then thought he should at least read the note before discarding it. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it just said thanks for your business, have a nice day. Why work yourself up into a frenzy over nothing?

He unfolded it cautiously, then wished he hadn't. The message was simple and stark:

Help me

He plunged back into a state of panic just as Dawn called up the stairs again about dinner. He quickly folded the note back up and thrust it into his pocket, planning to deal with it later. But then it struck him. What if the plea is urgent? What if later is too late?

He started down the stairs hesitantly, moving with agonizing slowness, hoping that some wisdom might alight in the course of the fourteen steps and rescue him from his quandary. After a few steps, he stopped and reread the note, just to make sure he'd read it right.

Help me

Yes, he had. Not much room for ambiguity there. He resumed his trudging down the stairs.

In the past, he'd always conferred with Dawn about problems. She was smart, reasonable, and had good judgment. If only there was some way of discussing this with her in the abstract. "Hey, Dawn, I've got this friend with an issue. Wants my advice."

But that never works. They always know. He had to confide in her. Had to confess. There would be consequences, of course. How severe, he wasn't sure. Would she just keep him at arm's length for a spell? Or would she throw him out this very evening and file for divorce in the morning?

He couldn't guess. But he had no choice. He had to tell her.

Or did he? What would she say? Regarding the note, what would be her plan of action?

She was a sensible person. She would say they had to take the note down to the police station as soon as they finished dinner.

Yes! Of course! After dinner! Whatever the situation was at the massage parlor, it could certainly wait until after dinner. Which meant that he didn’t really need to tell her. He could wait until they finished their meal. Then he would pretend he forgot something at the office that needed his urgent attention. He would then leave and go to the police with the note. The cops would say thank you for bringing this to our attention, we will handle it from here. Then he would go home like nothing had happened.

Simple solution. It was so damn obvious. Why hadn’t he thought of it right off the bat?

He put the note back in his pocket, relieved and pleased with his insightfulness. But just as he arrived at the bottom step, the woman’s plaintive question resurfaced and bit him.

“Is it spring yet?”

He stopped and sighed. The reflective pause of an émigré at a border crossing, passing from one world to another.

Dawn repeated her call to dinner with an impatient tone. He took the final step and slowly turned the corner. As he plodded toward her, he withdrew the note from his pocket and placed it visibly in the palm of his outstretched hand.

She turned and looked at it quizzically.

“What’s that?”

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. When deciding what to do, should the fallout from Kyle's wife be of a factor at all? Should a person help one hundred percent or just as much as they safely can without putting their own happiness at risk?
2. Surely Kyle was previously aware human sex trafficking exists; why is it morally different to know that this specific person was trafficked? Why is there sometimes a moral difference between conceptual evil and specific evil?
3. If Kyle doesn't discuss the situation with Dawn, is it Dawn's fault for creating a relationship environment where helping another isn't worth the marital fallout?
4. Does the note increase Kyle's culpability if he does nothing? If so, why?
5. If you were Kyle, what would you do and why? Would your answer change if the service being offered were more traditional prostitution? Gay prostitution? Are there variations of what is being purchased that would change your answer?

* * *

The Dinner

Anton I. Botha

* * *

Content Disclosure: Low Intensity

* * *

Mary was about to take a bite of her own flesh and could think of no good reason not to. Perched on the edge of her fork was a cube of meat glazed in a blood orange sauce, beautifully prepared by a world-renowned chef.

* * *

The package had arrived mysteriously, slipped under the door of her fifth-floor Manhattan walk-up. No stamp. No name. Just an elegantly written card on textured off-white paper:

> *David Taggart hereby cordially invites you to dinner at his San Francisco residence on Saturday, September 20, 7 p.m. PDT. We sincerely hope we can count on the pleasure of your company, Ms. McCarren. Your opinion is sought on a matter of some importance. It promises to be a night not to be forgotten.*

Along with the card: a first-class plane ticket, hotel confirmation, and a typed letter from Wynslow Wayne, Taggart's personal assistant, wishing her a comfortable journey. All expenses paid. No obligations. Just dinner.

Mary had never met David Taggart. She doubted many outside his inner circle had. A notorious Silicon Valley billionaire, he made his first fortune selling a crypto exchange and was now the reclusive force behind one of the most powerful venture capital firms in the world. A libertarian futurist rumored to bankroll lawsuits, sway media narratives, and haunt elite conferences, Taggart was as reclusive as he was influential.

Mary paced her apartment, equal parts intrigued and unnerved. She googled the Fairmont. Estimated value of the trip? Around twelve thousand dollars. Three months' rent.

Her fingers hovered over her phone. Then, without fully deciding to, she dialed.

In less than a full ring, Wynslow Wayne answered: "*Good afternoon, Ms. McCarren. We've been expecting your call,*" her voice British-ish, but not quite. Polished. Vaguely unsettling.

Mary's concerns were brushed away with uncanny precision. She hung up, unsure whether she'd just been reassured or hypnotized. But her curiosity had been sparked—and that always won.

* * *

Mary hadn't planned on a career in clickbait. She dreamed of investigative journalism but ended up at *Woke*, writing articles like "5 Animals You Didn't Know You Were Eating" under the pseudonym Bridget Sauré. A little part of her died with every headline. Still, for her own sanity, she snuck in serious work under her real name when she could—like that *Guardian* piece that had made waves.

It was a deep dive into the environmental cost of industrial meat. In it, she argued—as she had in her doctoral thesis—that while outlawing meat was unrealistic, serious limits were needed. If society returned to pre-industrial per capita consumption levels, global emissions from meat could be halved. With the rise of plant-based alternatives, current habits were not just unsustainable—they were unethical.

The article caused a firestorm. Her inbox imploded. Conservative pundits called her un-American. On CNN, she defended her work opposite a meat lobbyist in a made-for-TV showdown. She'd grown up eating brisket like everyone else, but the science, the suffering, the scale—she couldn't ignore it. And unlike most advocates, she wasn't calling for a ban. Just a reevaluation.

* * *

She packed for San Francisco with military precision, laying everything out on the bed like a surgeon prepping for surgery. Her ex, Michael, used to photograph the scene and send it to his family as proof of her insanity. In time, Mary began to wonder if he had a point—her packing did have a serial killer quality: methodical, meticulous, unnervingly exact. She felt mildly vindicated when she found out that she was forty-two percent German thanks to one of those GeneVeritas genetic tests. She comforted herself in the fact that all Germans packed this way and resigned herself to the futility of fighting this genetic predisposition.

* * *

The hotel room was nicer than her apartment. A handwritten note welcomed her and confirmed her driver would arrive at 6:12 p.m. PS: There is a private tour of Alcatraz arranged. A special visit to Robert Stroud's quarters, the Birdman himself.

Mary hadn't told anyone but her close friends about her fascination with Stroud. And yet... here it was. Gift wrapped. Her stomach flipped.

* * *

At 6:12 p.m. sharp, a porter approached her in the lobby.

"Miss McCarren? Your car is ready."

* * *

The car advanced onto a pitch-black driveway extending about half a mile to a minimalist, monolithic structure perched on the edge of the Pacific cliff. Smaller than she expected. A woman stood waiting on the path, lit by the almost extinguished sun and the cold gleam of embedded LEDs guiding the way to the door. She donned a cream bodycon dress, matching cream heels, and blonde hair pulled back in a strict bun. After Mary exited the car, the woman extended her hand and introduced herself.

"Wynslow Wayne, Dr. McCarren. We are so pleased you made it."

Despite the setting, the house revealed little. No fanfare. No other cars. The only decor was a Latin phrase on the doormat: *Isto posito egredere foras*. Mary caught the Latin for "assumptions." The rest escaped her. Wynslow gestured toward the elevator.

When it opened, Mary stepped into a glass-walled space overlooking the Pacific. The house was not on the cliff—it was in it.

The interior was minimalist but warm. Everything had a purpose. No Persian rugs or gilded statues—just thoughtful quiet luxury.

Wynslow led her down a floating staircase into a lounge divided into two zones: a reception space with white cocktail tables and a dining area set for six.

“Everyone, may I have your attention? Our final guest has arrived,” Wynslow’s voice cut effortlessly through the room. “Mary, these are your fellow guests—Tomi, Ren, Winston, and Suntosh.”

Mary did her best to remember names—pairing Tomi with a tomcat in her mind before being offered a drink by Wynslow.

“A Bulleit rye, ice chips, splash of lime cordial,” she said.

“You got it.”

With that, Wynslow left only for a waiter to appear with her exact order seconds later.

“A bit disconcerting, isn’t it?” said a voice beside her. She turned to see Winston—herringbone blazer, jeans, an ethnic scarf that announced man of the world.

Mary cleared her throat, trying not to choke on an ice chip. “A tad, but we do owe our host a certain debt of gratitude, I suppose.”

Winston smirked. “True. I flew first class from London. Not something a journalist like me does often.”

“Gossiping about our host?” Tomi asked, gliding over with a vodka soda in hand.

She had bottle-blonde hair, a scarlet cocktail dress, and the kind of charisma that belonged on a Fox News couch. Her outfit left little to the imagination.

“Tomi, what is it that you do?” asked Winston, averting his eyes in a northerly direction.

“I host *The Daze* podcast—maybe you’ve heard of it? I lay out real agendas for the conservative youth of this great freedom-loving country.”

Mary stiffened. Now she recognized her. She’d hate-listened to a few episodes—freedom of speech, flag-worship rants, etc. Tomi was Texas royalty: sharp-tongued, privileged, unapologetic.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Mary lied.

Mary became aware of a presence next to her and turned to meet Taggart’s gaze. He didn’t enter the room so much as he appeared in it. Unannounced and unceremonious.

“Good evening, everyone. I am so pleased you could all join me in my home tonight.”

The guests were still mid-sentence when he uttered these words, most did a double take to confirm it was, in fact, Taggart. As the realization set in across the room, so did an atmosphere of silence and singular focus.

“Most of you have traveled great distances to be here—for that, I thank you. I know you must be curious why I’ve brought you here. I ask that you bear with me just a few moments longer. What I can be transparent about is my intention to pick your minds clean. Each of you brings a distinct, informed perspective. I didn’t invite you for polite conversation, I need your help in examining something that cuts to the core of who we are—and who we might become.

"So please, speak plainly. Think deeply. You may find yourselves far outside your comfort zones. Should that moment arise, I encourage you to set aside your emotions. After all, what is reason, if not the tool we use to rise above instinct?"

As Taggart delivered his welcome remarks, Mary was struck by how much shorter he was in person. His skin looked... preserved. Pale, taut. Too smooth to be natural yet not frozen like Botox. His expressions moved effortlessly. He couldn't be younger than sixty. But he looked forty. Maybe younger. Turns out the fountain of youth isn't a place, just a very large bank account.

"Before we take a seat at the dinner table, let's all enjoy our drinks, and I will ask the chef to send some canapés our way to fend off any urgent hunger pangs."

A waiter emerged silently from behind the eastern wall, silver tray in hand, and offered Mary and Winston a canapé. Nestled inside a hollowed-out shiitake mushroom were strips of perfectly medium-rare steak—caramelized outside, pink inside—topped with black truffle oil and whole mustard seeds.

Mary picked one up delicately and popped it in whole. The flavors played together like a string quartet—refined, harmonious, exquisite.

As the tray made its way around the room, Mary noticed both Suntosh and Ren politely declined. Curious, she walked over to Suntosh, still nursing a nearly full glass of wine. He looked uneasy.

He appeared South Asian, dressed in a black mandarin-collared suit that matched his jet-black hair. Something about him felt guarded.

"For someone so meticulous about our travel plans," Mary said, "Taggart seems to have skipped the bit about dietary restrictions."

"An unfortunate oversight," Suntosh said. "Beef wouldn't normally feature on any menu I'd choose. But I trust provisions have been made."

"I'm sure they have. What do you do, Suntosh?"

"I write for a Sunday paper in India—social and cultural commentary. I'm also fairly active on social media. Around ten million followers across platforms. Not as impressive as it sounds in a country of 1.4 billion."

With that, Taggart interrupted their conversation: "Will you all please join me at the dinner table," he said, waving the guests in the direction of their place settings with a smile.

Mary was seated next to Ren and adjacent to Taggart at the head of the table. Ren was tall, sharp, and impeccably dressed in a slim gray suit and skinny silver tie. His face was unreadable, fixed in the kind of polished neutrality that could easily belong to a stoic monk.

All the guests were now positioned behind their chairs. Taggart signaled for them to sit as if now eager to dispense with formalities. The table itself was set with fine crystal stemware, gold-rimmed white plates with black place settings, and subtle gold thread woven delicately in a radial pattern resembling the double helix of DNA. Mary usually found gold to be a crass decoration, but it was subtle enough to avoid that label.

A waiter once more appeared from around the corner, sporting a bottle of white wine. He circled the table, making sure everyone got a tasting measure. Mary's glass frosted up almost immediately as the cold liquid settled in its delicate crystal vessel.

“I trust you’re all comfortable. Tonight’s meal will be one of the most intriguing you’ve ever tasted—that, I’ll guarantee.

“It’s been prepared by Chef Juan Mallmann, widely considered the foremost expert in meat cuisine. He’s been working with me for some time to develop this menu. I do hope you enjoy it.”

Taggart now turned his attention to Ren and Suntosh who were sitting on opposite sides of the table furthest away from Taggart.

“On a somewhat related note, I trust no one here has any objections eating meat. Couldn’t help but notice some of you didn’t partake in the canapés we brought out earlier.”

Suntosh spoke first. “Forgive me, but I’m a vegetarian.”

Ren followed. “Same here. I hope that won’t be an issue?”

Taggart folded his hands. “My understanding is that your reasons are moral, not religious. Is that correct?”

Ren nodded. “That’s right. Given the givens, meat production at scale is indefensible. I ate meat as a child but stopped—and I’ve made the case publicly that if everyone in China adopted American meat habits, we’d be finished.”

Suntosh took a sip of water. “I too gave it up after seeing industrial farming up close, like Ren I couldn’t justify it—morally or environmentally. India also cannot afford to become a Western-style meat-eating nation. The consequences would be cataclysmic.” He glanced at Taggart. “And if I may say, I’m surprised, given how organized this evening has been, that you didn’t already know that.”

Taggart chimed back, "You are forgiven! Did you notice my doormat on the way in, *make no assumptions in this house*? Why did you assume that what you were being served had either a negative environmental impact or a sentient experience?"

Suntosh: "You said we were being served beef, no?"

"You were, and I am sure Winston, Mary, and Tomi can attest what they ate was in fact beef."

Tomi started nodding in agreement as Taggart continued.

"But did you eat a cow?" Taggart asked, casually. "The meat you tasted was never part of a living, sentient animal. It was biofabricated using renewable energy and the latest advances in cellular agriculture.

"We start with a small sample of stem cells harvested non-lethally from free-range donor animals. These cells are then cultivated in bioreactors under tightly controlled conditions, fed with a nutrient-rich, plant-based growth medium.

"The real breakthrough, however, is in how we *structure* the meat. We use high-resolution 3D bioprinting to layer muscle, fat, and connective tissue with remarkable precision. Custom-designed hydrogel scaffolds mimic the extracellular matrix, allowing us to control texture, alignment, and density. We've even developed protocols to fine-tune marbling by adjusting fat cell distribution on a micro level.

"You want wagyu-like tenderness? We can program that. Rib eye chew? Done.

"We're no longer just replicating meat—we're perfecting it."

Taggart looked at Ren and Suntosh now sitting in silence. “It would seem to me that given that you both professed a love for meat and gave it up for noble reasons, you can now again enjoy it as everything I am serving tonight had no sentience and no measurable environmental footprint.”

With that three people dressed as waiters appeared carrying two plates each covered in silver cloches. Using a formal French dinner service style, each plate was placed in front of the guests delivered over the appropriate shoulder. In coordination, they removed the covers to reveal a beautiful arrangement with a small strip of white meat, some greens, and deconstructed string beans. There was a smear of orange sauce that looked like a comet streaking across the plate.

One of the waiters announced in a thick French accent, making eye contact with the guests one by one: “Madame and Monsieur, for this evening’s aperitif, we are serving fresh greens, inverted string beans, and the breast of a dodo. It is paired with a chilled Château Margaux sauvignon blanc. Please enjoy!”

Mary looked at Taggart in surprise and simply repeated the word “dodo.”

Taggart grinned. “Well yes—dodo.”

Mary: “As in the Mauritian flightless bird that went extinct over a hundred years ago?”

“Well, you see it occurred to me that to grow meat with the technology available to us all you really need is the basic building blocks, the most fundamental of which is DNA. As it turns out, dodo DNA is available. Oxford University still had some tissue left in its natural history museum, and all it cost me was a modest donation. Well, to cut a long story short, I managed, and so here we are. The six of us will be the first people in well over a century to eat the dodo. Please, enjoy."

Taggart picked up his knife and fork, cut the meat, dipped it in the sauce, put it in his mouth, eating while looking at nothing in particular. He took a sip of his wine and pronounced: "That is honestly even more delicious than I hoped. Please try."

Everyone, in unscripted coordination, picked up their knives and forks and began eating in silence.

Mary took her first bite gingerly, as if the meat might contain fine bones. But the moment it touched her tongue, all apprehension disappeared. It was moist, tasted like an improved version of duck, and was flavorful in all the right ways. There was no apprehension with the second bite. Mary observed everyone else eating the two or three bites of dodo they had on their plate. Tomi let out an annoying "hmmm" after each bite. Mary hated to admit it, but Tomi's moans were warranted, the dish was fantastic.

Upon finishing his plate, Winston jokingly piped up, "What's next, Taggart? Woolly mammoth?"

"Funny you should mention that, Winston. We do have the DNA—or most of it—but we're still working on perfecting the meat. We're collaborating with the University of Moscow, which holds a remarkably well-preserved tissue sample discovered in Siberian permafrost. That's given us a decent starting point. Still, DNA degrades over time—its half-life is roughly five hundred years—so we're filling in the gaps with genetic data from the Asian elephant. If all goes well, we'll have you back for mammoth steaks within the year."

Mary raised an eyebrow. “So, this is the big secret? You’re planning to disrupt the meat industry by selling… extinct animals?”

Taggart smiled. “Disruption, yes. But I prefer to think of it as a reimagining of our relationship with meat and of what we consider sacred.”

As he spoke, waiters returned—two clearing plates, another resetting the table. A fourth refilled their glasses with a light California pinot noir.

Taggart continued, eyes gleaming. “That’s what I love about science: with every leap forward, a taboo crumbles. And with each taboo we break, we become freer. More evolved. The Pill shattered the sexual double standard. Organ transplants redefined the sanctity of the body. IVF rewrote the rules of parenthood.”

He paused, savoring his wine.

“Why not do the same with meat?”

The waiters reappeared with their silver cloches and performed their coordinated dance around the table, meticulously placing each plate and, in unison, revealing its contents. Again, the waiter described the content of the dish. A serving of potato and leek purée, accompanied by a slice of Marilyn Monroe’s thigh, prepared with Hungarian paprika, Dijon mustard, forest honey, and drizzled with an essence of cloves.

This time, it was Tomi’s mouth that dropped. “Did he just say the thigh of Marilyn Monroe? The actress? The human being!”

Taggart simply nodded without uttering a word.

Suntosh looked at his plate in disgust. “This is human meat? Cannibalism? You want us to engage in cannibalism?”

Taggart took a sip of his wine and simply whispered, “Why not? We used the same methods as with the other meats, no sentience, the person in question is no longer with us, the DNA was legally obtained at auction.”

Winston huffed. “I can think of three reasons this is insane: it’s definitely illegal, unhealthy, and undeniably immoral.”

Taggart steepled his fingers. “If I may correct you—briefly. First, legality. In the state of California, there is no statute explicitly prohibiting the *consumption* of human flesh. What’s illegal is murder, assault, and the desecration of human remains. We’ve done none of those.

“Second, health. I assume you’re referring to kuru—the prion disease found among the Fore people of Papua New Guinea, linked to ritualistic cannibalism. That was caused by consuming infected neural tissue. What we’ve produced contains no pathogens. In other words: zero risk.

“And third...” Taggart smiled faintly. “As for morality, I’d argue that’s more fluid than you’d like to admit. But perhaps I should defer to our resident philosopher. Mary—are we immoral for dining on Marilyn?”

Mary was still stunned, lost in a semi-dreamlike state, barely aware of the conversation around her. “Hmm... moral, well no, well yes.”

Taggart, with disconcerting reassurance, said, “Perhaps you’d like to gather your thoughts, Mary. Take your time.”

After a pause, Mary—composed but hesitant—spoke: “Well... morality, in the broadest philosophical sense, is a human construct—a system of values we've built to reduce harm and maintain social cohesion. But it's never been fixed. What was once moral—slavery, public executions, even child labor—is now abhorrent. And the reverse is true too. As our understanding evolves, so does our morality."

She glanced at the others before continuing.

"Utilitarians like Mill would argue that if no sentient being is harmed and the net utility is increased, then the act is justifiable—even moral. And from a constructivist view, like Korsgaard's, morality isn't discovered, it's made—shaped by reason and context. So... if this meat wasn't sourced through suffering, if consent was given, and no real harm is done... then—well—why shouldn't we eat it?"

Taggart smiled. "Spoken like a true philosopher, Mary."

Tomi's mouth hung open. She muttered, almost involuntarily, "This is... unchristian."

Taggart turned to her. "Pardon?"

"I said it's unchristian. Eating human flesh goes against the teachings of the Bible."

Taggart smiled. "Does it? And where exactly does it say that? I've looked. The Bible prohibits murder and desecrating corpses, yes—but it's oddly silent on the *consumption* of human flesh. In fact, one could argue the opposite. Every Sunday, millions of Christians symbolically consume the body of Christ. Transubstantiation, is it not? Bread becomes flesh. Wine becomes blood. Ritual cannibalism baked into the ritual.

"So if anything, your faith doesn't forbid this meal. It foreshadows it."

Ren quipped, "That doesn't change the fact that this is wrong. You cannot eat the flesh of other humans."

"Please, give me one good reason why not. It seems to me your response is rather more affective than rational. Which, given the level of surprise, is perhaps to be expected. But I will make you this wager, if anyone of you can think of a compelling rational reason not to eat a bite of Marilyn, I will give each of you one million dollars, but if you can't, you should at least try."

Suntosh: "It's unnatural—and potentially unhealthy—for the human body to consume human protein. We simply don't know the long-term effects."

Taggart: "A fair concern, but scientifically unfounded. The human digestive system breaks down protein into amino acids—it doesn't distinguish whether they came from cow, chicken, or human tissue. Your tongue might care, but your gut doesn't.

"What matters is the composition: fat ratios, amino acid profiles, micronutrient density. In our lab-controlled process, we fine-tune those variables to optimize nutritional value—better, in fact, than conventional meat.

"As for long-term effects—we've run extensive simulations and in-vitro studies. Thus far, no adverse outcomes. Quite the opposite: preliminary data suggests some bioavailability advantages over animal meat."

Winston: "But what about our psychological well-being? You are asking us to eat the meat of another human. What about the long-term trauma?"

Taggart: "This is hardly a warzone, Winston; you all have free will here. But I think if you did some soul searching, you'll find that your apprehension lies in conventional morality. There is no logical basis for this to be a traumatic experience."

Taggart, without ceremony, cut a piece of meat and took a bite. He nodded with approval and drank a sip of his wine. “Quite delicious,” he declared. “Give it a try.”

With that Suntosh picked up his cutlery and said, “I have to admit, he is right, there is no good reason not to.” He cut a piece and placed it in his mouth. He let Marilyn rest on his tongue. To Mary’s surprise, after a pause, Suntosh began chewing, slowly and rhythmically. The rest of the table watched in silence, waiting for him to swallow.

“And?” asked Winston.

“Well, all I can say to my utter disappointment is that Ms. Monroe is quite delicious.”

Mary stared at her plate, it was all so perfect, and the pleasant aroma of cloves floated around her like a thin mist in a holiday kitchen. Her numb hands reached for the cutlery, as if on autopilot.

She sliced a small piece of the actress’s thigh and placed it in her mouth. She hesitated for a moment, but it was too late, the flavors were so delectable that she started chewing as if by reflex. *Jesus*, she thought, *Marilyn is delicious!*

Based on Mary’s expression, Winston took a small curious bite. He too seemed to come to the same conclusion. Now Suntosh, Mary, and Winston ate alongside Taggart, as if it were any ordinary meal. Small cuts loaded on forks interspersed with sips of wine. There was an odd silence, one only momentarily broken by the scrape of a knife against a plate. Tomi and Ren were sitting in silence, mouths open at the spectacle they were witnessing.

Tomi managed only to lift her jaw to utter, “This is complete madness, you have all gone mad.”

Taggart retorted, “It would seem to me that you are the one that is mad, after all, what is madness but the absence of reason. And you, Tomi, are not acting rationally right now.”

Like a reprimanded child Tomi picked up her cutlery and started eating her portion as if a plate of steamed vegetables. However, after the first bite her disposition also changed. Mary observed the same unfortunate enjoyment. Ren was the only one left still staring at his plate.

“Give it a try, Ren,” Taggart suggested.

Ren succumbed to the pressure. Mary got the impression that despite his best effort he could not conceive a rational reason not to. He, too, was now experiencing the delicate flesh yielding under the pressure of his teeth. The delicious flavors releasing, spilling over taste buds in a carnival of carnivorous delight.

Before long, all the plates were empty.

Classical music began playing in the background—softly, but audibly. Elgar’s *Enigma Variations*, if Mary wasn’t mistaken. “*Nimrod”—an uplifting death march to our last taboo*, she thought.

“Congratulations on overcoming your irrational apprehensions. I must admit, I was betting at least one of you would tap out, but here we all are. Ready for your final course?”

“So, what are your plans with this? You want to sell dead celebrities to the public?” asked Winston.

“Well, yes, but live ones too… with their permission, of course. Soon, the world will be dining on its favorite celebrities—actors, singers, athletes. Dinner parties featuring them will be all the rage. The Kardashians have already agreed to sell me their DNA in return for a royalty. Soon Kim Kardashian Cutlet will be available to order along with a catalog of other celebrities. At a price of course, it will be exclusive… at first. This will become a new multibillion-dollar industry and I, alone, will pioneer it."

While Taggart was pontificating, the table was once more cleared in what was now starting to feel like a ritual. Six more plates appeared, six more plates covered in the now familiar silver cloches. These lids were once more lifted in a choreographed fashion to reveal six more portions. At this point, Mary was starting to feel a bit tipsy from the wine she had been sipping with increased frequency. However, she was laser focused on Taggart who continued.

"Oh, and there is one more course to serve this evening… you."

Mary looked around the table and noticed that everyone had something different on their plates. She had what looked like a small square of pork belly on her plate while Winston had what appeared to be carpaccio on his. Taggart's plate seemed to have smaller portions of everyone's dishes.

Mary was still reeling from the prior course having not really registered what Taggart had meant by "you." Winston was the only one with the wherewithal to ask Taggart, "What do you mean, *you*?"

"Well, how to put it, the meat in front of you comes from your DNA, you have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to try a bit of yourself at no cost or injury."

This time, everyone's mouths dropped. There seemed to be a collective "WTF" telepathically communicated between every guest present as they shared glances.

"We never gave you permission for this! What on earth? This is outrageous—simply outrageous!" Tomi exclaimed.

Ren: “Now look here Taggart, this has gone too far. You stole our DNA? This will be reported to the authorities. This is criminal.”

“Well, actually each of you gave me permission to do this. You may not remember or have realized it at the time, but that is half the beauty of T&Cs.”

Mary: “What do you mean; we never signed anything to attend this party.”

Taggart: “Well, you see, you did, admittedly it was a while ago, but all of you did.”

Winston: “Speak plainly Taggart; when would we have agreed to something like this? Never in a million years.”

“Winston, Mary, Suntosh, Ren, and Tomi, didn’t each of you take a GeneVeritas DNA test? Did you not voluntarily send your DNA to this company, a company that I bought out of bankruptcy and fully control? And did you not agree to the terms and conditions under paragraph fourteen subsection five, which states we are entitled to use your DNA for any purpose we, i.e., I, see fit.”

“This simply can’t be legal,” Ren protested.

“Not according to my lawyers, I can assure you I have very expensive ones. Chef Juan has spent weeks perfecting a recipe to go with each of your own unique flavor profiles. You are going to love it, I promise.”

“We can’t eat ourselves,” Tomi said, her voice quivering. “This is beyond...” Tomi was now at a loss for words.

Taggart gave Tomi’s pause some room but sensing a continuation wasn’t forthcoming, he filled the silence. “Why not? Every day you digest millions of your own cells; it is part of the body’s natural processes.”

With that, Taggart took a small bite of the piece that matched Tomi's plate.

"I really enjoy your flavor profile, Tomi. I can really taste the Nordic in you. Suntosh, you're quite tasty as well—*exotic*, if you'll forgive the stereotype. But Mary, you're my favorite; I am even thinking we may want to offer you your own deal. 'Mary's belly' we'll call it—a perfect blend of European—you're a marketing dream."

"This is beyond the pale, Taggart," Winston protested.

"Why? Aren't you even a little curious? Take a moment to think about this rationally. I am giving you each a unique opportunity unprecedented in human history. This, I can assure you, is the most expensive meal you'll ever eat. Growing your individual cuts cost me a small fortune."

Maybe it was because Mary was in a state of shock, but she—as she had done twice before—picked up her knife and fork, cut a small cube of meat, and lifted it to her mouth.

Mary was about to take a bite of her own flesh and could think of no good reason not to. Perched on the edge of her fork was a cube of meat, glazed in a blood orange sauce, beautifully prepared by a world-renowned chef. Until moments ago, Mary had no idea what she was about to consume. Until moments ago, she couldn't imagine this dinner party getting any stranger. How wrong she was.

It tasted like a mild version of pork—tender, juicy, and flavorful. In a word: delicious. Mary gave the portion in her mouth two or three bites before she swallowed. Honestly, that was all it needed. It was so soft—what a cliché food writer might call "melt in your mouth." Mary hated to admit it, but Taggart was right: she was delicious.

One by one, Mary noticed the others picking up their cutlery and making small incisions into themselves. One by one, they loaded their forks and took bites—each taking the first steps into a new realm of consumption.

Taggart quipped, “Excellent! I can see you’re all enjoying this course. No surprise, really. Why wouldn’t you enjoy yourself? It’s eating something you truly love.”

That phrase—*enjoy yourself*—Mary thought, had never taken on that particular meaning in human history.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. The guests make various arguments about why eating lab-grown animals, humans, or themselves is wrong. Which argument (*if any*) do you find the most compelling and why?
2. Some of the guests make the argument "It's just wrong." Is that a good enough argument, or must all arguments be backed by articulable reasoning to be valid?
3. Is there a moral distinction between eating lab-grown: (1) animals, (2) extinct animals, (3) celebrities, and (4) yourself? Why or why not?
4. What do you think is the strongest argument for (*and against*) being a vegetarian? Does lab-grown meat solve these ethical concerns? Why or why not?
5. Do you think the government should regulate or ban any of the meat in the story? What's the best argument for (*and against*) the government banning the various story meats?

* * *

The Wife

Veronica Zora Kirin

* * *

Content Disclosure: Depiction of Sexism

* * *

I am the second Mrs. Roberts. The first one was Returned. That's all I know. I'm not sure if I have big shoes to fill, or if she failed so catastrophically that my job will be easy.

My Training involved how to support a man who works all day so their productivity stays high. We Wives are extremely important to keeping society and commerce going. They told us it had been tried—women working—and society had nearly collapsed. I couldn't imagine wanting to spend every day away from home like that.

Mr. Roberts has been kind to me, so far. I watch as he completes his morning routine before leaving for work. He wears a brown suit, typical of a working-class man. He sets his brown leather briefcase by the coat stand. Adjusts his tie in the mirror—today it is dark brown, matching his shoes, which he puts on with a long shoehorn so he doesn't have to sit and wrinkle his suit. Brown overcoat on top, though the spring weather is warming. Finally, his hat, a beautiful wool fedora with a cream feather stuck in the ribbon, matching his shirt. He picks up his briefcase, turns to me, and tips his hat, then walks out the door.

I sit on the arm of the living room couch until his sedan pulls out of the driveway and rolls away. It has been a week of living with Mr. Roberts. A week of performing Wifely duties and patiently supporting a man I know only in theory, based on my preparatory lessons. They gave us each a packet at the Training Center describing our assignments. Mr. Roberts plays tennis on the weekends with the neighboring men. Mr. Roberts prefers steak over meat loaf (which was just as well—I hate cooking meat loaf). Mr. Roberts works at a very important manufacturing firm, which is a thirty-five-minute commute from home.

Mr. Roberts reported being worn down each day when he comes home from work. The former Mrs. Roberts should have been able to support him enough that he would have all the energy he needed for work. That, at least, I can infer as part of her failing.

I rise from the couch, brush off my full skirt, and go to the laundry room to retrieve my dusting supplies. It is a Tuesday, and that means dusting, cleaning the bathroom, and rump roast for dinner. I pull out the blue bucket with the cleaning supplies inside. Spray bottles and rags protrude from its top. I carry it back into the living room and pull out the yellow gloves that will protect my nails from the chemical cleaners. Rag and spray bottle in hand, I begin to wipe the coffee table, end tables, mantle, and photos.

There are several photos of Mr. Roberts on the mantle. Mr. Roberts with his brother. Mr. Roberts playing tennis. Mr. Roberts receiving his promotion. The last frame on the mantle is empty, its cardboard backing a framed match for my new husband's suits. It is waiting for me to add the photo of our Uniting, which arrived yesterday from the photo studio. Mr. Roberts flashed the blue and white envelope at me when sorting the mail and smiled. "It has arrived, my dear," he grinned, sending butterflies into the depths of my belly. "Will you place it in that empty frame tomorrow?" He left the envelope on the mantle.

I carry the envelope and empty frame to the couch and sit. I remove my gloves, leaning forward to lay them on the coffee table with the frame, and open the envelope, an image of the side of my arm peeping out from inside. I gently remove the photo, avoiding touching the gloss with my fingertips, and hold it out to admire. I wore a cream dress, a fascinator, and a red lip. Mr. Roberts wore his brown suit, standing behind me with his arm around my waist. It was a pleasing photo. I was proud of finally receiving an assignment. And Mr. Roberts was handsome, or handsome enough to have garnered a few nudges from the other girls at the Training Center. I make a mental note to schedule a celebratory photo shoot for our six-month anniversary. That will be a nice addition to the mantle.

I pick up the frame and turn it over and back again. Ordinary. A tasteful silver frame with a black felt back and stand. It is clean, but not new. Had it held the former Mrs. Roberts before she was Returned? She is not something I wish to dwell on. I gingerly work my thumbnail under the little tabs of black-painted metal holding the felt backing to the frame. A little wiggle and the felt releases from the frame with a brush. I set the backing on the table next to my gloves, then work my fingernail under the cardboard while pressing the glass from behind to give it rise.

Why, there are two cardboard backings! A wisp of paper is revealed pressed between the two cardboard panels. An additional spacer, perhaps?

I peel it away to find a brief inscription on its front.

Underside of your nightstand drawer. Burn this.

I stare at the paper. It is barely the length of my finger, yet delivered such a shock that I am hardly breathing. I should tell Mr. Roberts. He will know what to do. It isn't my place to be snooping around, especially based on cryptic messages. I know my training backward and forward. I believe in our motto, "Honor. Love. Service." I even aced my exams. Being a replacement was a challenge, and they'd chosen me because I was up for the task. I am not going to fail my Trainers after only a week. My place is to support my husband, and that is what I am going to do.

I place the paper on the table, frame our photo, and continue my chores.

Mr. Roberts arrives home just after 5:30 p.m. We were told that not all husbands come home directly from work, but to be ready regardless, and never complain if they were late. So far, Mr. Roberts has been prompt. I admire that about him.

"Good evening, my dear," he calls from the entry. I emerge from the kitchen, hands wrapped in my apron, as he hangs his hat on the coat tree.

"Good evening, Mr. Roberts." I smile with a peck on his cheek. I watch for any signs of frustration on his face, hoping he had a good day at work and will take the mysterious note in stride. “How soon would you like to eat?”

“Now would suffice,” he sighs as he pops his shoes off his feet, cream stockings disheveled from a day of office work. I nod and swish to the kitchen to set the table.

“How was your day?” I ask as he enters the room. I again watch his face, his shoulders, for any sign of tension. We have been Trained to notice even the slightest detail, taught that men will often hide their frustration with work out of propriety.

“Just fine,” he replies. His tone is even. His shoulders relaxed. I believe him. “We pushed through a major proposal,” he continues. “Could be a big deal, if we’re lucky. Will you be my good luck charm?” He smiles at me.

How sweet, I think. I nod, placing the plate, napkin, and silverware in front of him as he sits down at the table. “Yes, of course. Best of luck. I’ll keep it in my thoughts.”

He catches my wrist before I can move to the other place setting. My breath stops in my throat and I look into his hazel eyes. “Thank you,” he says. We hold each other’s stare for a beat, then he releases me. I take a deep breath, smile, and complete the table setting. I glance at him as I bring out the steaming roast.

“Looks delicious.”

“Why thank you,” I reply.

“Do you…” he trails. “Where did you get the recipe?”

“From the Center,” I reply. He offers a curt nod. Was he looking for something more interesting?

I serve us, remove my apron, then sit across from him at our little dining room table. I watch as he arranges a cutlet of meat on his fork and takes a bite.

"It's good," he says, noticing my eyes on him. I smile at him, though I wasn't waiting for a compliment. I was waiting for the right time to show him the note. Perhaps once he has a full stomach.

I watch him clear his plate, using the last piece of meat to wipe up the juices. *Might as well go for it before he gets too settled in his evening routine.* I take a deep breath to gather my nerves. "I found something peculiar, today," I broach.

He looks up at me. "Oh?" He wipes his mouth with his napkin.

"Yes," I say, fiddling with my silverware. Best to not avoid his gaze. I didn't want to implicate myself in any wrongdoing. It wasn't my fault. I look into his eyes. "While I placed our Uniting photo. There was a note in the frame."

He is very still. I think my heart might fall out of my chest while I wait for him to reply. "A note?" he says, finally.

"Uhm, yes. Or so it seems. Shall I get it?"

"Yes, please, Mrs. Roberts," he says. He folds his napkin and pushes away his plate, clearing a place in front of him. I go to the living room and retrieve the note from the coffee table, placing it in front of him before sitting back down. He fingers its edges, taking it in. He sighs, deeply. "I'm sorry, my dear," he says, looking up. My chest tightens. Is he going to reject me? I've done nothing wrong. "You've stumbled upon a bit of my baggage, I suppose. I'm sorry you had to see this. Would you mind waiting here while I see what is beneath your nightstand drawer?"

"N-no, that would be fine," I gasp. Okay, I'm not in trouble. Or, not yet. So far, Mr. Roberts is proving honorable.

Aligned with my vows at the Training Center. If I serve well, he will care for me in return.

I hear his footfalls upstairs, the floorboards creaking while he investigates my nightstand. Will he find it? Is it all a hoax? He is gone for what seems an eternity, finally returning to the kitchen with a folded letter in his hand.

"So, it seems there was a leave-behind from your predecessor. Again, I am sorry. I want you to feel you are my first priority, my focus, not a simple replacement." I had hoped he would show me, allow me to see what he had found, but he walks to the stove and lights the gas burner, burning the letter and the scrap of paper from the photo frame. The acrid smell of burning ink and pulp fills the kitchen. He drops the remnants in the sink to flame out without burning his fingers. "There," he says. "It's like it never happened." He turns to me, cradles my chin in his hand, and leans down to kiss my forehead. "Thank you for telling me. You did the right thing." He looks me in the eye, a serious look on his face. Then, like the flip of a switch, he smiles, and lets go of my chin. "Time for the game shows, eh dear? I'll see you in the living room?" He leaves without waiting for my reply.

I stare after him, processing the rapid sequence of events, then gather my wits. "Yes, of course!" I call, hoping my delay wasn't obvious.

I get up, tie my apron around my waist, and gather the dishes. I place them on the counter while I put on my gloves to begin the washing up and look in the sink. There is a corner of the letter resting in the basin. I can see a small amount of script unharmed by the browning of the fire. *It's forbidden,* I tell myself. Yet, I stow the charred scrap in my apron pocket.

Midnight. I can hear Mr. Roberts snoring in the twin bed next to mine, our nightstands between the beds delineating our individual space. I ease myself up and wrap myself in my silken robe. His bed is closest to the door, and I have to cross by its foot to leave. I could say I was going to the bathroom if he woke. That is normal behavior. Still, I tiptoe.

I pull the door partway closed behind me, obscuring the stairs. Down I go, keeping close to the wall where the steps will creak the least. The carpet pads each footfall as I shuffle into the kitchen, gently opening the cabinet where my apron hangs. I sink my hand into the pocket and feel for the scrap of paper. I pull it out, careful not to brush the edges of the delicate and damaged page against the fabric. I turn and steal away into the laundry room. I close the door and turn on the small light above the sink.

The survivor is the size of my palm, two edges pristine, one long side burnt and browned, an injured triangle. The same beautiful script in black ink adorns the page. What could I gain from this? I am breaking my vow of honor, aren't I?

I read.

...n despair.

...ope you make it out.

* * *

The next several weeks are espionage. I tidy, clean, and cook with the scrap of letter hiding beneath the insole of my house shoe. When I am on my hands and knees scrubbing the bathtub, the scrap is with me. When I make the beds, tucking the sheet corners as I was shown by our Trainer, the scrap is with me. It burns at my foot and pushes at my mind. It is mine. Something of my own that no one else knows about, not like the dresses meant for Mr. Roberts's eye or the apron meant to keep me clean and presentable. I have a secret, and it is *mine*.

All the while, Mr. Roberts is kind to me. Not once does he mention the letter, though it seems the incident has assured him of some of my loyalty. He starts bringing home flowers when he arrives from work, is more amorous in the evenings before bed. He compliments the tidiness of the house and meals he has tasted many times before.

"This rib eye is delicious, Mrs. Roberts," he says as he dabs the corner of his mouth with his napkin. It is a Monday, and while he has tasted my rib eye each Monday previous, I always try to add some kind of unique flavor or presentation so he won't tire of the recipes we were taught.

"Thank you, Mr. Roberts," I reply, smiling to myself.

He sets down his silverware. "I must speak to you about something," he says. His plate is still half full. My spine immediately goes stiff and I grip the silverware in my hands. I have been so careful. I am always wearing the house shoes when he is home, or they are by my bedside table as we sleep. Could he know? He holds my gaze as I force a smile, his eyes not settling on one single feature on my face. Is he searching for a clue? "I realize we haven't been together for very long, but it seems we get on quite well. Don't you agree?"

"Y-yes," I reply, imitating my normal tone of voice. "Very well. It has been a joy."

"Good. Good, because there is a work function this Friday. The board and upper management will be there. I realize it is rather soon, for us, but things seem to be going so well, I thought you might be ready to accompany me."

My face flushes. “Why, that would be lovely, Mr. Roberts. I would be delighted.”

“You do have a cocktail dress?”

“Yes, they gave me one.”

“Then it’s settled. Tell me the color and I’ll match my tie. The event begins at six-thirty and includes cocktails and hors d’oeuvres, so you won’t be on the hook for dinner. I’ll come home first to escort you.” He returns to eating with a smile.

“Lovely,” I say, my heart thudding in my chest.

* * *

On Friday morning, I bustle about the house to complete my chores early and have plenty of time to prepare for the event. As I work, hair bundled in curlers atop my head, I mentally go over the Training I received for corporate events. How to delight colleagues, ingratiate a boss, and even influence a deal in favor of my husband.

I enter our closet and pull out the beautiful blue dress from the Training Center, its satin reflecting the light in waves around its skirts. It is a flattering piece, giving my body the illusion of an exaggerated hourglass shape. It hasn’t been out of its protective sleeve since I received it, and it will need a bit of care before it will be worthy of Mr. Roberts. I hang it in the bathroom for steaming. I pull out the steamer case from the linen closet and unzip it, laying its contents on the counter. Steamer. Attachments. Manual, which seems to be falling apart. As I open it, the pages fall to the floor. I sigh, pick them up, and open them to determine which page numbers have fallen so I can replace them in order.

But where there should be the tidy print of typed instructions, I find feminine script.

Before I can pull myself away, I am reading.

If you already read my letter from the bedside table, do ignore this one. I simply made a copy, just in case you felt compelled to show Mr. Roberts and it was destroyed. I felt that way, once. I felt so proud of being a Wife.

Supporting Mr. Roberts seemed like a dream come true. I had anticipated the day of my assignment and Uniting since I was a little girl. It's what we dream of, isn't it?

I'm so sorry to shatter the illusion, my dear, but it is just that. An illusion. The truth is, we are indentured servants, kept for the sole benefit of another. What about your benefit? What about your potential in this life?

They told us women working was a disaster. That it broke society. But we are *working! Here, in this house, you slave away every day, cooking, cleaning, primping for him, keeping him happy. "For the higher good," they say. But is it good that our minds should be so wasted? Minds so clever we can discern our husband's mood from the other side of a room or help close a business deal without appearing to be any influence at all?*

There is a society called The Underground of women enriching their minds. It has been more than eye-opening. They meet at the grocery store on Wednesdays. I'm sure you're used to having the groceries delivered. They encourage it. If you went out and mingled, you might be exposed to other ideas, and so they teach us to stay put and use the services. You benefit from another's service so that you may serve your man. It's a thinly veiled trick, yet we fall for it. But I'm sure you can find a way to attend.

I think Mr. Roberts suspects me. I can't suppress the ideas we've been sharing in The Underground meetings. I try to be as

> *demure and subservient as I always was. For three years I've served so well. If you find this letter, my dear, it's because I was Returned—and someone like me won't be Recycled. I hope to goodness The Underground can find me and rescue me before they terminate my service...*
>
> *You deserve more. Find them. Learn from them. Let them help you escape. There is more out there. The whole world is vastly different than what we've been taught. More than the despair of giving your life away in the shadow of a man. I hope you go get it and achieve the freedom that may no longer be in reach for me. I hope you get out.*
>
> *Yours,*
> *Mrs. Roberts*

Her signature ends in a beautiful flourish. The final lines match those I stand on inside my house shoe. I'm not sure I am breathing. I stand in shock, staring at the scripted handwriting, reading and rereading as if compelled by a spell on the page. It is a window into a world I didn't know existed.

A car door slams shut, breaking the trance. *He's home!* I scramble, shoving the letter between the pages of the steamer manual, and pressing the manual back into the bottom of the steamer case. I am nowhere near ready to greet him. The dress needs steaming. My makeup is only half done. My hair is still in curlers. *Oh, what a mess.*

"Darling!" he calls when I don't greet him at the door.

"Upstairs, dear!" I reply over the banister. I can see half his body beyond the stairway wall. "I'm so sorry—I am running behind. This event is so important to you, and I admit I lost track of time as I got ready."

He chuckles, leaning against the first step to get a better view of me. “I’m sure it will be swell,” he says. “I’m going to grab a small bite, then come up to change.”

“There are cold cuts in the fridge,” I instruct, and he disappears from the stairway.

I duck back into the bathroom and turn on the steamer. While it heats, I finish my makeup, including that same red lip from our Uniting. I whirl, pick up the steamer, then hold out the dress and soothe away its wrinkles.

I hear Mr. Roberts coming up the stairs. *Good enough*, I think. I remove my robe and throw the dress over my slip, fumbling to fasten the back.

A tap comes at the bathroom door. “What color is your dress?”

“Blue,” I say as cheerily as possible.

“Like your eyes,” he replies. I listen as his socks pad away on the carpet and resume orienting myself in the dress. The curlers come down, I plump the hair, pin it, spray it, then take a moment to look myself over in the mirror. The look needs jewelry. I turn to leave the bathroom and knock the steamer over. Water spills out.

The letter! I leap to rescue the steamer case, then throw towels down over the mess. The case drips in my hand, but no water has gotten inside. I feel a drip on my foot and look down in despair. Water had splashed on my dress.

I set the steamer case in the bathtub, wipe up the steamer and its parts, and place them beside their case in the tub. I then pull out the hair dryer.

“Nearly ready?” comes Mr. Roberts’s voice from the other side of the door.

“Oh, yes! Just a final touch.” I turn on the hair dryer and do my best to remove the damp blotches on the skirts of my fine dress while brushing with a dry washcloth and fluffing to get some air beneath the fabric. I sigh a breath of relief as the wet marks disappear.

I emerge from the bathroom and bustle into the bedroom. My dress shoes are still in the closet. I slip off my house shoes and step into the smart blue heels, then move quickly to the jewelry case on the dresser, my skirts bustling around me. I pull out a match set of silver jewelry set with sapphires. I’m able to clasp the necklace and earrings, but the bracelet defeats me. I look at myself in the mirror. My reflection is just like the examples in the Training Book. I take a deep breath, then take the steps down into the foyer, where Mr. Roberts waits.

His face shows no small amount of pleasure. “You look perfect,” he says, taking my free hand.

“Almost,” I reply, using the sweet tone of voice we were taught. I hold up the bracelet.

“Oh.” He grins. He takes the sparkling thing and clasps it to my wrist. He places his hand over it, holding my hand in his, and looks into my eyes. “Now you’re perfect.”

I break his gaze, looking down and away, as if bashful, as if his praise is what I live for.

“I can’t believe they hired a string quartet,” I whisper to Mr. Roberts as we are served champagne at the bar. We are on the thirtieth floor of his office building, surrounded by windows overlooking the city.

“Yes, they do tend to throw lovely parties,” he replies. His hand is around my waist. “Now, don’t be shy. They know you’re new, but they've heard good things from me." He pecks my forehead, then turns us to join the crowd of his colleagues.

"Roberts!" cries a plump, red-faced man who slaps the back of Mr. Roberts. His face glistens, and he huffs as if he had just run up a flight of stairs.

"Mr. Carrigan," my husband smiles, "may I introduce Mrs. Roberts?"

"My, my, welcome young lady. Welcome. You seem to be settling in quite nicely, from what I hear. Roberts here has had his best quarter, yet! I credit you in part." Mr. Carrigan sweeps his arm across the room. "Enjoy yourself, dear! Don't need him holding you all night. Go, eat. For once, you didn't have to prepare it!" He guffaws as he clinks his glass against mine. I look at Mr. Roberts, who is smiling, though his face is slightly pink. "Shoo!" Mr. Carrigan flicks his wrist at me.

"Oh, well, thank you, Mr. Carrigan," I say. I peck Mr. Roberts on the cheek, then make my way to the buffet that lines the windows. Beyond the glass, city lights twinkle on, the sunset beyond a beautiful pink and orange, made more intense by the tinted glass. I gather myself a plate, then look about the room.

There. To the side are some tables where the other Wives sit. They lean toward one another, laughing in between bites of their food. A woman in red waves me over.

"Well, well. If it isn't the new Mrs. Roberts," she says, a blonde curl dropping into her eye.

"Hello. Yes, that's right." I sit, arranging my skirts on the chair.

"Don't bother, dear," says the woman in green sitting next to me. "It's not that kind of party." I look at her, confused.

“What she means,” says the woman in red, “is that those gentlemen over there are going to eat and drink and talk shop all night. We’re here because we’re supposed to be, but you won’t have the chance to talk, again.”

“Oh,” I say and begin picking at my food.

“Relax! It’s more fun that way. I’m Mrs. Schultz, by the way.” Red reaches for my hand across the table. She holds my gaze for what seems a beat too long.

“How do you do, Mrs. Shultz?” I return. The table laughs.

“She’s so polite, still! You’ll see, dear.” With that, the table returns to its previous state of relaxed chatter. And that is it. I sit. I eat. I drink. I meet the other Wives. And then, at eleven, I am escorted home.

“I’m sorry we didn’t see much of each other this time,” Mr. Roberts says as we drive. “Some of the parties are more intimate, however. You’ll see.”

“Of course,” I reply. I am here to serve in whatever capacity makes him more efficient at his work. But I’m disappointed. I’m a thing he brought to the party because it’s conventional to bring the Wife. My extensive Training in business meetings didn’t seem to matter.

We return home in silence, padding up the stairs, I ahead of him.

“Would you mind my using the bathroom, first?” he asks. “It will take you longer, won’t it? I’m done in.”

I shake my head. “No, of course.” I proceed to the bedroom and begin removing my jewelry. I hear the faint sound of the shower curtain sweeping open across the bathtub.

The bathtub! I left the damp steamer and its case in the tub. I grip the dresser, listening. *It is just a manual,* I will. *Just women's tools. Set them aside. Please...*

I wait. So long. Too long. Listening. Why is he so silent?

The bathroom door opens and I jump half a mile. Mr. Roberts enters the bedroom, shirt half undone. "You're not changed, yet?" he asks.

I look down at my dress. "Oh, no. I'm so tired I'm moving at a snail's pace."

He comes over to me and kisses me lightly on the lips. "I didn't mean to wear you out, my dear. I'm sorry. Be quick to bed, then." He walks to the closet and begins to change into his pajamas. I fumble the rest of my jewelry off, pick up my robe and nightgown, and take them with me to the bathroom.

The steamer is in its open case on the counter. I can see the manual beneath, undisturbed. My breath catches in my throat in a sob of relief. *What am I doing? I should have shown him this letter before the party! It is a wonderful placement. He is a wonderful man. I am successful.* I look at myself in the mirror, a miserable woman returning my gaze. I exhale slowly, then close the steamer, put it away, and get myself ready for bed.

* * *

The morning light streams in through the bedroom window. I crack an eye, unfocused, watching the dust dance in the rays landing on the floor. Its advanced progress tells me it is late. Mr. Roberts let me sleep in. I press my head into my pillow and stretch, feeling the cozy covers around me. How I love Saturdays.

I roll over to look around our room, then sit up with a jolt. Mr. Roberts is there, fully dressed, sitting on his bed, facing me with clasped hands. I bring my hand to my cheek and blush. "Are you watching me sleep?" I ask in my small Wifely voice.

"You could say that," he replies. He stands and hands me my robe. "Come downstairs with me."

I adjust my nightgown and then pull down the covers, wrapping myself in my robe. I slip on my house shoes, then follow him to the stairs. "Did you make me breakfast?" I ask, smelling coffee. He doesn't reply. *All the Wives would be jealous*, I thought. *This is so rare it was mentioned only in passing at the Center. Men don't cook!* I clutch my robe to me with pleasure as we descend into the foyer.

We round the corner into the living room. I freeze, now clutching my robe uncertainly. Two strange men in black suits sit in our living room. They are sipping coffee from our coffee mugs. They stand, buttoning their suit jackets. I look up at Mr. Roberts, who nods at the men.

"Cathleen," one says. "You're to come with us."

He used my first name! We only have first names in the Training Center, when we aren't attached to a husband. "Mr. Roberts?" I squeak, looking at my husband. He does not look at me.

The men make their way toward me.

"Mr. Roberts!?" I cry, grabbing his hand. He wrenches away from me, stepping into the living room, exchanging places with the imposing men as each takes one of my arms. I yelp and begin to struggle, my skin twisting under their grip. They pull me toward the front door.

"Be quiet," the first man says. How can I be quiet!? He is Returning me! He didn't even talk to me about it. We were doing so well. It was so good!

"Mr. Roberts! Talk to me! I'm your Wife!" I scream, leaning away from the men in suits. He turns to face us and holds his hand up to the men. They stop pulling me but do not release their grip.

"No," Mr. Roberts says. I stop struggling as he speaks. "You are not my Wife. You are one of *them*." His lip curls with disgust.

I sob. "I'm not. I'm not. I only just found the letter. I didn't know. I don't know!" He has to believe me. I have to make him believe me. I am good. I am so good. I served so well. "We were just finding our rhythm. It was so good!" The words tumble from my mouth.

"I hesitated last time," he interrupts.

"What?" I ask.

"I hesitated. Your predecessor, the first Mrs. Roberts, was with me for three years. I was naive. I thought her restlessness would settle. By the time I confronted her, she was already heavily involved with The Underground, those stupid wretches who want to destroy all we've worked for and take us back centuries. I let it fester." He grits his teeth and looks through the front window. "This time we nip it in the bud." He looks back at us, looking at me with the same disgust he showed as he spoke of her. "Get her out of my sight."

"No!" I yell as the men pull me out the front door. "I didn't go! I didn't do anything!" I watch Mr. Roberts leave the living room as I am dragged into the black van waiting in our driveway. I trip as I fight, my house shoe with the little scrap of paper falling to the cement, bare toes scuffing the pavement.

They shove me into the van and slam the door behind me. There are no windows in the back, only a console light glowing by the front. I spring at the door, yanking on the handle, but it will not budge.

The front doors slam and the engine starts. I lose my balance as the van begins to back from our driveway. I prop myself against the front panel, knees up, and hold my head in my hands. I did nothing wrong. It was going so well. Everything was okay.

You didn't show him the letter. No, but I was going to, I think. I… I'm not sure what I was going to do. I lean my head against the front panel, looking up at the metal frame of the van. There I stay for the entire ride. A half hour? An hour?

We stop and I hear the shifter thrown into park. The front doors slam. I crouch, ready to spring. I'll leap from the van as soon as that door opens and run. I grip the wall and wait.

The door opens and I leap right into the arms of one of my captors. "NO!" I belt as the other throws a black hood over my head. I kick and shake but the man has his arms around my entire torso. I'm helpless.

They don't say anything as they carry me. Gravel crunches beneath their shoes. I can smell grass and dust. A door clangs and their footfalls begin to echo. It smells of must. I whimper, and they tighten their grip.

Another door clangs open. A few more steps and we stop.

"Where do you want her?" the man holding me says. I hear no reply, but they move further into the room. How many people are around me? My head brushes against the man's chest and hood over my head, making it hard to distinguish anything.

The man swings me around and drops me on a metal folding chair. The hood whips off my head and I cough, squeezing my eyes shut against the sudden light. In a way, I don't want to open them. I don't want to know what comes next.

I hear a snap in front of me, so close to my face that I could feel the wind from the fingers passing by each other. I flinch, then open my eyes. Someone's face is inches from mine. I squint, then I realize I know those smiling features.

"Mrs. Shultz?"

She grins. "Welcome to The Underground."

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. There is an underlying assumption that all sentient beings crave equal opportunity. If that is the case, why do some people support their own oppression? For example, some women were against the women's right to vote.
2. Was it ethical for the first Mrs. Roberts to leave notes that put the second Mrs. Roberts at risk and in awkward situations?
3. The second Mrs. Roberts seemed to believe she was happy and interested in making her partnership work. What do you think her process will be for coming to terms with her match failure, social expulsion, and The Underground?
4. Is it morally wrong for a person to *want* to be ethically "kept" in the way the story describes it? That is to say, limited choices, but not having to worry about housing, healthcare, or paid work outside the home.
5. What are the various blueprints for ending a repressive system like the one described in the story? Which blueprint would you be most likely to participate in?

* * *

Ground Control

Martin Riemer

* * *

Content Disclosure: Strong Language; Depiction of Mental Health Issues; Graphic Violence

* * *

Filthy bastard, I whispered as he gruffly turned over to the other side, *you miserable, disgusting cocksucker,* until he pulled up the blanket to his chin and bit it, *that's what you are, you creep!*

He feigned not to hear me, as if he'd already fallen asleep, his eyes forcefully shut, but I knew for sure that he could hear me, I always know it. The nights in Saint Andrew's are usually quiet unless the restless man across the corridor screams for hours or indulges in never-ending moaning. Thomas keeps his trap shut most of the time. He knows what's good for him.

Yes, eat your blanket, you piece of shit, I hissed at him, *you know what's in store for you if you start screaming again!*

Thanks to the sleeping pills, the ordeal phases of the other patients are largely confined to the daytime. At night, I'm mostly alone. When Thomas sleeps and I can dwell on my own thoughts, undisturbed by his constant presence. Protected against his malice and his piteous, abominable weakness. My God, how I despise that creep!

Motoharu and the others wanna puke when they see your daffy mug!

Soon after I could feel him actually dozing off. His facial muscles relaxed, his fingers, clenched around the upper end of the blanket, slowly let go, and his thoughts vanished into the erratic snarl of his dreams. At last, I was alone.

* * *

I'm not always so tough on him. Usually, I try to ignore him. I'm more at ease when I don't bother about all the shit that's whizzing around in his head. In our head, I should say, because in some way—I might as well admit it outright—I am Thomas myself. I find it extremely hard to put up with this idea. I'd rather consider myself an independent observer, trapped in his mind. But I'm afraid it's not that simple. All the memories that accrued over the course of his life, I have them all available. And if identity is the sum of individual experiences, then there's hardly a way around it. Then I am Thomas. I can remember every single detail of his miserable life. Nothing is concealed. And nothing spared. I'm trapped in here, like in a tin can, doomed to witness every mischief this pitiful poser engages in. And for a long time, I didn't even know he could hear me. Only recently I found out about that. After his release from the Mill, a custody center for difficult adolescents near Banbury.

After an incident of grievous bodily harm, a senile judge considered Banbury appropriate for Thomas, instead of sending him to a prison for juvenile offenders. He was fourteen at that time and people were worried that his situation would be aggravated by premature criminalization. His situation! That's what people had always been concerned about most. They should have been there, they should have seen how he smashed his fist into Ava's face, over and over again, he didn't even stop when she'd passed out. She had lent me—lent *him*—some money and after scores of useless requests to pay it back she got angry. She was upset, called him names, and Thomas lost it. It makes me feel sick when I think back to it. I detest violence to an extent that the very thought of it stresses me out. In this respect, I am extremely sensitive. I instantly forget about everything else, I want to scream and flail, just to make him stop, but like I said, at that time I didn't even know he could hear me.

This distaste for violence is a strange thing because I don't even feel physical pain. Or joy, for that matter. It doesn't affect me in the way it affects Thomas. It's on a purely intellectual level that I recognize what is happening. When he tosses himself off, I don't feel pleasure. I just sense what he's doing and why. These kinds of things don't mean anything to me. Neither the joy nor the pain. But the mere idea of physical violence gives me the creeps.

Of course, the educators and social workers overbid themselves with sympathy for Thomas's difficult situation. They treated him like a victim. Like someone who deserved compassion. Already in his childhood, the doctors brought up nothing but excuses for his uncontrollable rage attacks. Emotion regulation deficit. Impulse control disorder. These were the common terms to embellish his wicked nature. If they knew what I know, for sure they wouldn't talk like that. If they could see what I see, if they could read his mind like I do, they would turn away from him with horror and keep him locked up forever. But it doesn't matter. I will take care of it myself. From now on I will prevent him from doing any harm. When he claims to feel better, I'll make him drivel and impose spastic convulsions upon his body until they strap us. And then it will be closed ward again.

* * *

Thomas always had a short fuse and the older he got, the harder it was to keep his outbursts under control. They tried pills and therapy, but nothing helped in the long run. Several times he had to change schools. When he got expelled from the last one, his mother sent him to a boarding school outside Birmingham, where they had the capacity for individual supervision, and nearly everyone agreed upon the charming narrative that Thomas's behavior was simply caused by immoderate impulsivity. He wasn't obstinate per se, and least of all, he was ill-natured. He was just incapable of suppressing his immediate impulses in emotional situations and sticking with the more amiable parts of his personality. In those moments, he quite simply wouldn't know what's okay and what's not. What's right and what's wrong. All he would need in those moments was to be reminded of his natural character. In hindsight, I don't understand how I could listen to all this bullshit without losing my mind.

After two years of boarding school, Thomas moved back with his mother and, for a while, his "situation" really seemed better. He was able to pull himself together, more or less. Through a former classmate, he became acquainted with Ava and Ralph, who were dealing coke and E and let Thomas enter the business as a pusher. Four months later, Ava was hospitalized with a cranial fracture and Thomas was sent to Banbury.

* * *

The Mill is a custody center specializing in young offenders with mental health issues. Thomas hated it. The social workers, the medics, the other residents. It was the first time he was actually forced into something. All the earlier therapies and even the boarding school had been subject to the unsteady decisions of his mother, who permanently fluctuated between pedagogic advice from all sides. Banbury, in contrast, was the enforcement of a sentence. Even if his mother had wanted to, she wouldn't have been able to get him out there.

The only thing she could do, and did, was to increase the likelihood of an early release by consenting to all sorts of medical treatments, including deep brain stimulation. Thomas was fourteen, so he wasn't even asked for his approval before they implanted the stimus. It still makes him mad to think about it, and sometimes, when he's on the edge of engaging in some foolery, I bait him about the episode. In my opinion, it was the first reasonable decision they took in Banbury.

When he woke up from the surgery, the medic in charge disclosed to him that microelectrodes had been inserted into his limbic system. Supportive devices to regulate his emotions and action impulses. In critical situations—which he was trained to identify in separate therapy sessions—Thomas was able to increase the pulse frequency of the stimus via a control module. Not much later, this function was transferred to a program that used physiological parameters to predict critical situation with much greater reliability.

The stimus turned out to be quite effective. He no longer lost his temper at the slightest provocation. At least compared to the rage attacks I had witnessed before, he was able to hold his fire. One memory (the first for which I have a strong sense of being present) dates back to the last year in the Mill, shortly before Thomas's release. We were in the yard, playing football, and one of the others made a derisive comment about Thomas's stimus. I sensed his arousal, and immediately I feared that he would lose it again. I was panicking, appalled by the thought of another outbreak of violence. I was hoping so much he would just ignore it, that he would just keep moving, and when Thomas indeed left it like that, I was ecstatic with relief. But already in the evening his thoughts were completely absorbed in violent fantasies. He was lying in bed, imagining how he would beat up that bloke, how he would smash his face, kick his convulsing body until I felt really sick. *For God's sake,* I thought, *just let it be! What's in it for you anyway?*

* * *

It was shortly after his return to Birmingham when I realized that Thomas could hear me. I was completely staggered. Imagine you spend your entire life in the head of such an idiot, and you always think you can't do anything about it, this moron doesn't even know you're there, and then he suddenly *hears* you. I've always had my own thoughts, my own stance. But after our release from the Mill, I also started to verbalize them. Not like real talking, of course, more like mumbling to myself. I didn't want to communicate or something. It was more like some kind of whim. Didn't even realize I was doing it.

But then I noticed that Thomas was getting nervous when I muttered under my breath. For a while, I was just observing. I have to admit I was a bit slow at putting the pieces together. But eventually, Thomas would even smite his forehead, snapping, *Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!* over and over again. It was so pathetic! I made him do that whenever I wanted to. Whenever he imposed his stupidity and his aggression upon me. It was such a good feeling, at last being able to speak up for myself. Within the following weeks, I learned how to increase the loudness of my thoughts, so he must hear me if I wanted to.

You're a shit, I told him once, and he started weeping. I felt his rising panic. My thoughts were much louder than the last time I had spoken to him.

"What the fuck...?" he whimpered. "What...?"

It was during a game of Tackle-Race at a leisure park in downtown. He'd gotten mad at one of the other gamers, who was obviously cheating with a sneaked-in pirate software. You could clearly see the scar above his left ear, where the neuro implant must have been inserted. But Thomas instantly forgot about that. With shivering hands, he took off his goggles, dropped them to the ground.

Now what, you shit? I gloated when he staggered off the gaming area. *Don't feel that strong anymore?*

His legs turned to jelly. I could feel it as if they were mine. I told him what I thought, what I had kept to myself for so long, and he whined and suddenly regained strength and started running like hell over the grass field like some maniac. I couldn't stop laughing, *you know you can't run from me,* it was so pitiful, so completely wretched.

He was in such a frenzy, he just ran and bawled and people were looking at him. They must have thought he was nuts. Or that he'd stolen something. But then there was nobody chasing him. People just stepped aside. Tried to avoid contact. Thomas didn't notice them anyway. Didn't attend to anything around him. And when he reached the road at the side of the park, he didn't stop either, he just ran into the street and almost got hit by a car. It was really close. The driver slammed on shrieking brakes and brought the vehicle to a halt just a few inches from Thomas. People were screaming and rushing toward the scene. Suddenly, they almost fell over themselves to help.

Thomas regained some awareness of his surroundings. He leaned on the cowling and looked into the pale face of the driver. *What is happening?* he thought and then he sank down to the ground and burst into tears. This time the weeping was rather humble. Coming more from helplessness than from fear.

I admit I was shocked as well. Actually, I hadn't paid much thought about the impact that my interfering would have on him. I hate him, I really do, but I don't want him to die. I was just so fed up with his bullshit. I want him to live, but just not... not like this. Of course, I also thought that when he dies, I would die too. And I didn't want that either.

* * *

After that episode, Thomas grew pensive for a while. I gave him some space. Wasn't interested in talking to him anyway. In the same way that I'm not fussed about physical pleasure or pain, I am not afflicted with boredom. I'm okay with nothing happening. When Thomas is sleeping, I feel good. It's not a void for me. I have my thoughts and, really, that's all I want. All I ever cared for.

But the more I backed off, the more Thomas forgot about me. Took me for some kind of temporary lunacy that he was secure from most of the time. I guess he got accustomed to my occasional susurration. It didn't unsettle him to the same extent as when it was new. Of course, I knew he wasn't totally indifferent to my intrusions (as the idiot tried to pretend sometimes), but eventually, he began to react with anger and defiance instead of fear.

"What are you gonna do about it?" he once snapped.

He'd insisted on taking the bike of some guy he barely knew, and I'd told him to let go. I have to admit this was quite a blow. Being a toothless bystander when no one knows you're there is one thing. But when you're forced to watch although you have clearly announced your disapproval... that is abasing.

You pathetic loser, I bawled. *You stupid shit, I'll drive you mad, that's what I'll do, you shit!*

I don't know if he noticed my discomfort, but when I continued, he tossed his head like a spastic and left the confused boy alone.

But the taunting comment stayed with me. What could I do should Thomas finally manage to just ignore my whispering and my yelling? Was I even capable of doing something?

I used the nights to practice. When Thomas was asleep, I tried to concentrate on the fingers of my hand. Imagined tiny movements of the wrist. Nights and nights, I practiced, but to no avail. I was trapped in my little tin can.

In the end, it wasn't concentration that set off the breakthrough. It was fear. It was fulminating panic. It happened in a pub where Thomas used to meet up with some of his fellows. He was about to get new drinks at the crammed counter, when somebody from his left pushed to the front and ordered a beer. Thomas wasn't even particularly agitated in this moment.

"Easy, man!" he said.

The bloke turned around for a second, sneering at us, and before I realized what was happening, Thomas's fist landed in his face. A sudden uproar went through the crowd. People stepped aside. The sneer in the bloke's face immediately turned into surprise. He brought his fingers to his bleeding lips. Then Thomas kicked him in the balls, and when he sank to the ground, Thomas grabbed a beer bottle from the counter and I screamed, I don't know what, just *Aaaaaaaaah*, I knew he would smash it over his head, I screamed and screamed.

And while screaming I suddenly realized I was holding his arm. It wasn't even hard. There was no force I had to oppose. No resistance at all. The hand with the bottle just stayed where it was. In the air slightly above my right shoulder. Just because I didn't move it.

"Let go!" Thomas yelled.

He was still raging, absorbed in his orgy of violence, but inside I could already sense his rising anxiety. Within seconds, the bloke on the floor was forgotten. Thomas turned toward me, went overboard in fear and despair.

"No, you fucking bastard!"

With his left, he battered his right arm, which I still was keeping hold of. As if he wanted to punish himself for beating the other guy. Some of the bystanders who went about stepping in hesitated anew.

"No, this is MINE!" he cried. "MINE!"

Spit and tears sputtered from his face.

"FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!"

The bottle fell from my hand when Thomas, as hard as he could, sank his teeth in his arm. People had to detain him.

"Please, please, get off me!" he whimpered in the grasp of two men.

I hardly paid attention to him. I was probably as overwhelmed with the new situation as he was.

* * *

After that incident he was admitted to Saint Andrew's, a nuthouse in Northampton.

You hear that, you jerk? A nuthouse! That's where you belong!

I know it's on account of me. I'm sure the medics would dismiss him in no time if I wouldn't intervene. They don't know him. They can't see the foulness in his heart like I do. They are easily misled by his beautiful words, his promises. Thomas can act quite reasonable if he wants to. At the ward rounds, he says he repents what he'd done. That he's working on it. That he wants to improve. I carefully pay heed to the medics then, and when I feel they are taken in too much, I make faces at them or take a leak in Thomas's pants. He immediately starts weeping then and they send him back to his room.

It's better that way. Of this, at least, I'm sure. When I learned to take over, I realized that my power was restricted to very basic movements. Waving with arms or head. Or just keeping still, preventing Thomas from doing something bad. Complex, goal-oriented actions were far out of reach. Way too strenuous. All this was completely new to me. I needed training for the simplest actions, like a newborn, but I can only maintain control for a few moments. Then I just lose it and Thomas is back in charge again. I don’t know why I always lose it. Maybe this will change. But for the time being, it’s enough. It’s all I need to keep him here. With all the other imbeciles. For his own sake and also for mine.

For a while, I was actually quite content with the situation here in Saint Andrew’s. Had my peace, most of the time. Except for his vicious thoughts, I’m relatively safe from Thomas’s violent tendencies. The medics even assigned me a name. I’m schizophrenia (the idiot finally told them about me). They don’t understand nothing, but I have to admit, the fallacy is quite funny. I am Thomas’s condition. In a strange way, there might even be some truth in it, when I think about it. Thomas isn’t sick in the strict sense. His very nature is malice. The mental condition that his wicked mind suffers from is sanity. This is what they should call me. I am sanity. And I’ve made the grade.

But nobody ever understands that. Even in Saint Andrew’s, they treat him as they always did, headed by Dr. Motoharu, who initially was in charge of Thomas. They consider him a victim. A victim of circumstances. A victim even of me. They never accepted the idea that Thomas himself *is* the problem. This is why all their treatments and therapies are doomed to failure.

When they realized their inability to handle the situation, an external specialist was called in to replace Dr. Motoharu. Thomas already knew Dr. Rebbs from Banbury. She’d been part of the medical science team in the Mill and was familiar with his case. In Saint Andrew’s, they had several therapy sessions together, and at first, they were as rubbish as every other therapy that was imposed on him over the years.

"Well, how do you feel today?"

"What do you think?" he replied. "How would you feel if you heard that question every day in a room like this?"

He liked Dr. Rebbs. Unlike the other medics, she didn't pretend to be glad working with him. And yet, she had recently increased the frequency of their sessions.

"You've got a point there," she said, disinterested. She remained silent for a while, taking her time to sit down opposite Thomas and to arrange some papers on the table.

"What about your medication? Is the voice still bothering you?"

Thomas nodded. And like this, it went on. Questions about what I've said to him, how he reacted, and what he feels about it. I was hardly listening to the tedious conversation they call therapy.

"Good," Rebbs eventually said and looked at her hands. You could tell she wasn't really into it either. She was thinking about something else.

"Time to move on," she said calmly, more to herself than to Thomas. A long pause followed, and he started to get somewhat uncomfortable.

"I don't know how to start this," she finally said, her voice suddenly firm and resolute.

"It's the first time. I'm not even sure how I should address you. Thomas Two maybe? Tom? Perex? I don't know. You can hear me, right? Do you hear me?"

"What?" Thomas uttered. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

She ignored him.

"Can you lift his arm?"

Slowly I raised Thomas's right arm.

"Dr. Rebbs, please!" he begged. "Please stop it! Please don't talk like this!"

"It's okay, Thomas." She turned toward him. "This is necessary. It's part of the therapy. I need you to trust me now, okay? Don't be afraid! Just retreat for a moment and let me talk to him!"

Overwhelmed with consternation I could sense Thomas easing off. He was weeping nervously, but he kept quiet when Rebbs continued.

"Can you hear me?"

I opened his mouth. Like a fish. Tears ran down his cheeks.

"Can you hear me? Perex? Tom?"

"Yeeh," I managed to say.

I tried harder.

"Yeeehs. Eear youh."

I brought my fingers to Thomas's lips. Tried to bring them in a form I thought was beneficial for articulation. Soon I gave up.

"This will get better," Rebbs said.

A spasmodic sobbing went through Thomas's body.

"Hooow youh knooow?"

"Don't worry! I'm here to explain everything. For now, you just need to listen. I'm not sure where to begin. I've never spoken to someone like you. No one has. Hmm, do you know what a perex is?"

I wagged Thomas's head, but I vaguely remembered the term from the podcasts about life coaching that his mother was listening to all the time.

"Hmm, okay. I assume you remember everything since your early childhood, right? Since Thomas's childhood, that is. It's... that's not really true. At least not in the way you might think. You have access to his memories, to everything he knows and remembers. But you haven't really experienced them. They are false memories. Hmm, no, that's also not correct. The memories are as real as memories always are. As they are for Thomas. It's just that you haven't experienced the events to which they relate. Your ignition... hmm... you might as well call it birth or your first day... anyway, that was in the Mill. That's what you guys call it, right?"

I nodded.

"Good. Perex. Basically, a perex is a self-referential embedded system. A software that is able to process and modulate neuronal signals based on self-paced learning algorithms. Artificial intelligence, if you want. It spawns neuro-synthetic connections between its own hardware units and with the surrounding cells. Eventually, it evolves into a symbiotic bond with the system to which its hardware is implanted. From its first ignition on, it works entirely independently. Except for some initial specifications, of course. The critical parameter specification in your case was an aversion to violent and aggressive behavior. That's all. Everything else was left blank. I have checked the ignition myself. Even necessary instincts like self-preservation develop naturally during the integration with the host system."

I touched the scars on Thomas's skull, where the stimus had been implanted. I don't think my feelings were displayed in his facial expression, but Rebbs seemed to understand.

"Those are just sensors and pulse generators," she explained. "The data are processed on the main server. If we think in such categories, we probably have to say that your mind is there. But your physical body is sitting here in front of me."

"Aaaah..." I tried to warn her, but Thomas broke out screaming and started up from the chair. I couldn't hold him back.

"GET IT OUT!"

He was seething with rage, completely out of control.

"YOU GET IT OUT OF MY FUCKING HEAD!"

It was dangerous. For the first time in weeks, I was scared because I'd lost it. There was nothing I could do. I tried to fasten him like I did in the pub, but I couldn't. *Back off, you freak!* All I could do was yell. *Sit down! I'm warning you! SIT DOWN!*

But I knew it was in vain. Rebbs also had gotten up from her chair and stepped away from the table Thomas was leaning over in blind fury. He was sweating. Then the door opened and Motoharu entered the room, closely followed by another staff member. They must have been waiting outside, prepared for a situation like this. They seized Thomas by his arms, forced him back on his chair, while he was still raging. Motoharu plunged a syringe into his arm and injected a sedative.

"That's it for today," she commanded.

"Just one more thing," Rebbs said and hastened to the table, fetching a thin booklet from her papers.

"Read this, Thomas! It's important you understand. Both of you!"

"I want him OUT!" Thomas moaned in agony, slowly getting weaker.

"Seriously, Dr. Rebbs, it's enough!" Motoharu insisted. "Remember our agreement! You leave! Now!"

"I'll leave it here," Rebbs announced, grabbed the rest of her papers, and rushed out of the room.

"They really could have sent someone with at least a slight idea of empathy," Motoharu remarked when Rebbs was gone.

I could feel the sedative kicking in. The tension slowly passed off Thomas's limbs. Again, he turned into a weeping wreck. The assistant took him by the arm, helping him to get up, but I drew it back.

"Aigh whoa-nah reahd," I said and placed my hand on the booklet Rebbs had left on the table.

* * *

It was a handout providing medical information about personality extensions. Details of the procedure and personal accounts from affected people, intended to assist worried parents during the process of reaching a decision concerning their problematic children. One of the testimonials was from a guy of Thomas's age, even the problems that prompted his parents to consent to the treatment were similar. Impulsive, violent behaviors. He hadn't gone through the same shit as Thomas, no series of school suspensions and reformatories, but apparently, his issues had been grave enough to justify the procedure. In fact, impulsivity disorders were among the very first medical conditions for which it was clinically approved. He was better now, the guy reported in his testimonial. He still got angry now and then, the same way as before, but he was able to buck up. The handout contained five other firsthand accounts. Mostly from adolescents. One even came from a child of nine years.

"For young people, the integration works more smoothly," Rebbs explained to us when Thomas mentioned it during our next therapy session. "Probably because the host personality isn't fully developed. Still flexible to some degree. So it's easier for the perex to merge."

She paused and observed us in silence, mulling over an unspoken thought. Then she continued.

"I was eleven when I got mine. The ignition was set to counteract timidness. As a child, I was extremely shy. It was a serious problem. I hardly talked to anyone but my parents. No friends, no nothing. The teachers in school were at a loss. When they tried it the hard way, I just closed up more.

"My perex helped me. Hmm, at the time I didn't understand it. My parents made the decision. I wasn't interested at all, I just wanted them to take me back home. I didn't notice any change. It was no big deal for me. From my memories, I never would have thought that the change was so profound, but I've seen videos of myself, before and after the ignition. With the perex, I changed completely. Within one year, I had friends in school. I played with other children. I was invited to birthdays. Hmm, and went there. Just like every other kid."

"What did it say to you?" Thomas asked, and, looking to the ground, he added: "Was it mean?"

You shit! You creep!

"No. There was nothing like that. No voice or anything. Just me. I didn't feel forced or guided at all. I just did what I felt like doing."

His lips began to tremble. The baby was about to cry again. It was so disgusting.

You're disgusting, you little shit!

"It was never meant to be like this, Thomas. In all the cases I know, the perex entirely integrates with the host. Sometimes people report sudden out-of-the-blue thoughts, but this isn't perceived as something alien. More like talking to yourself in your mind. Like thinking to yourself *Hey, I might go to bed earlier today* or *Hey, I shouldn't take this so seriously*. Self-talk like that.

"Hmm. Cases like yours are extremely rare. Where the perex doesn't integrate and levels off into a state of psychological dissociation. Sometimes the ignition doesn't induce a change in the expected direction. No effect at all. As if the neuro-synthetic circuit is dead, but it isn't. The data processing of the system works fine. The perex just doesn't merge."

I was assailed by the image of a frightened homunculus, squatting in anguish in the corner of some deranged sadist's mind. Devoid of any power for resistance or escape.

"But what about the voice?" Thomas asked. "And that he can use my body? He spoke to you with my mouth!"

She looked at us, without any expression, and eventually wagged her head.

"Hasn't happened before."

* * *

"Whaad's the plaan?" I asked some days later. "Noow? Whaad's the poind of this all? Youh think youh can maigh thaad perverd normaal?"

Thomas was only half-conscious. *Fucking asshole,* he whispered weakly. He'd been sedated because the idiot tried to open his skull with one of Dr. Rebbs's pens. But something told me his folly was not the only reason. The idea of using a pen was too absurd, not in the least dangerous. I had the feeling Rebbs wanted to talk to me without interruption from his side.

"Youh think youh can cure thaad twaad?"

I was really curious. Over the last days, I had pondered a lot over the question. In fact, they sent a warden directly into his mind. If even I wasn't capable of mending his wicked nature, what could they possibly expect to achieve from out there?

"This isn't about him, Tom," Rebbs replied. "Thomas was hospitalized on wrong accounts. That was a mistake. Hmm, maybe he's not a very nice person, and he surely has some serious issues, but he's not mentally ill. He doesn't belong here. This is about you! You are doing harm to yourself. And to Thomas. I believe that he is capable of improving. But he needs your help! Your guidance, not your anger. As righteous as it may be sometimes. This is what we need to work on. This is the way to overcome the dissociation you are trapped in. It won't be easy, Tom, but we have a realistic chance to straighten this out. So you can finally merge."

I was aghast. Much more than by the unveiling of what I am, I was shocked by the prospect of what they wanted me to become.

"Naaah!" I burst out. "Aigh don'd whanna be heem!"

"It wouldn't be him, Tom. When you merge, the joint mind would be you as well. It would be a better version of Thomas, if you want. A version with less aggression and impulsive violence. A version including you. Not imposed on you. But also not governed by you. His mind will change in accordance with your desires. But for that, you need to overcome your disgust. Your repugnance, Tom, it isn't healthy."

* * *

You're a failure, Thomas once whispered when we were lying in bed at night. *A miserable aberration!*

He was right. I hate him, and I hate Dr. Rebbs for what she'd done to me, but they are right. I am a failure. That's basically what Rebbs told me. What she's still telling me in every single session. She doesn't use these words, of course, she hides her real thoughts behind gracious remarks about the unique difficulties I've been facing in this special case, but that's what it comes down to. I'm no good. I'm a nuisance. A disappointment for her and her fucking medical science team in Banbury. Fact is, I was never wanted the way I am. After everything that happened, after all the shit that I went through, all the pain I took on to keep Thomas from being such a twat, they still want me to change. *Me!* It's like it always was. Thomas is the victim. The unlucky sufferer of adverse circumstances. And me? What am I? Rebbs assures me that I could be the cure, but in fact, she thinks I'm the adverse circumstances.

Every other day, I have therapy sessions with Dr. Rebbs, while Dr. Motoharu has resumed her sessions with Thomas. I don't know what they are discussing together, and I have to admit, I don't care. I'm tired of all this. I try to fade out as much as possible during their sessions. Only when he gets upset by something Motoharu says, I am instantly on alert because I've learned that this often is an indication of imminent aggression. And then I detest myself for giving a fuck. Why do I even care about how bad and how destructive Thomas behaves? I watch him all the time, I am capable of preventing it, and when I do, they call me a flaw. Something that needs to be corrected. I wish I could leave this all behind. Even the nights no longer hold any relief.

"Cud me off!"

Usually requests like that were made by Thomas. It was the first time that I was asking for it myself. It wasn't just a temporary whim. I'd thought about it for weeks. Since Dr. Rebbs told me I had to change. I don't know why this thought seems so dreadful to me. But everything's been different since then. It's like I'm floating and I can't get a grip on anything. I just wanted it to end. Still, I was wary of revealing my self-destructive thoughts too early because I presumed that they would jump at the chance immediately. That they were anxiously waiting for my consent anyway, polite enough to not suggest it themselves. I was stunned when I heard Rebbs's answer.

"You know I can't do that," she said. Apparently, she didn't see any need for a further explanation.

"Why? You can'd disconnegd the circuid?"

She looked up. I had the feeling of not getting something obvious.

"Tom, you are a conscious being! And your system is based on the joint connections with the host. Cutting off the circuit would be permanent. You would cease. We can't just decide to kill you!"

"Bud I wand id! I decide!"

"Hmm," she replied, obviously searching for words. "Tom, I'm sorry, but... you have mental issues! In your current state, you aren't capable of making such profound decisions. You don't see things clearly at the moment. Your pessimistic idea that this is the only way out is exactly a symptom of your unstable mood."

"So id's a cadch," I muttered.

"A what?"

"You'd grand me my whish if I was sane. And to maigh you believe thad I'm sane, I have to withdrah from id."

She sighed.

"Tom, I don't know what to say. You're seeing things dark now. I'm trying to help you here."

"You mighd as well quid trying. Doesn'd maigh a difference."

"Hmm. Maybe it doesn't. But that's the definition of trying, isn't it? That it might be in vain."

"Whad ahbaud Thomas?"

"What about him?"

"Heh's here as well. Heh ev'n is human. And heh's suffering. Because of me. Because you pud me here. Id's your fauld. Which you could straighden out by cudding me off. And Thomas, heh wand's id as well."

"Thomas can't make this decision either. You are alive, Tom! You're a fully developed consciousness. For the same reason our law forbids abortions when the pregnancy has advanced too far. Sure it's a woman's own body, but when there's another life involved, you have to take it into account. You cannot just erase it just because you think you'd feel better then. Even if it's true, even if you would be better off, you just can't do that. Neither Thomas, nor I, nor you."

I kept still then. Didn't say a word for the rest of the session. I didn't feel there was anything more for me to say. She wouldn't hear me anyway. Nobody ever would.

"Tom, you have to trust me!" she tried to appease me. "Such a sacrifice is not a solution. Hmm, not a good one. I know there's a better way. For Thomas and for you."

* * *

Sometimes I wonder where this depressive mood came from. I have to admit I've never been in such a sullen state before. Even in earlier days, when Thomas acted out his nasty outrages without restraint, when I hadn't yet been able to intervene, even then I didn't feel so desolate. I was frightened then and dismayed, but it wasn't this dreary bleakness I'm wrapped in now. I wish I'd just disappear.

But they don't let me. Thomas's repeated pleas for cutting me off have been turned down the same as my own, and he has given up on asking Motoharu for it. We've reached an unspoken agreement to leave each other alone during our respective therapy sessions. The truce gives me a little relief, and also Thomas has put up with the situation to some degree. Still, he's gotten upset with Motoharu lately.

"You don't understand SHIT!" he yelled at her. I thought about taking over, making him collapse or biting his fingers as I'd done before to punish him for such imbecilities, but what good would it do? He'd just let off steam and then calm down again. He's afraid of Motoharu.

"YOU'VE NO IDEA HOW IT FEELS!"

He pushed over his chair, Motoharu quietly observing him. In the end I didn't even revile him for being such an idiot. Couldn't really blame him for his anger anyway. Motoharu isn't any better than Rebbs. They are so utterly convinced that they know what's best for us. Better than ourselves. They act like some cocky gods, patronizing their wards, torturing them with their goodwill. They keep on saying we should be patient. That every treatment needs time. I can't hear it anymore.

* * *

It's been three weeks now since they added the new stimus to my circuit. It's strange that in my thoughts I still call them "stimus." I know that they aren't. I know that they do much more than emit electrical impulses. That they form an integral part of me.

"They define you," Rebbs recently overstated.

I felt the urge to slap her in the face, but I contained myself. Just mumbled "stupid bitch." It wasn't worth the trouble I would get in.

In our last session, Motoharu again said we're on a good way and for the first time it didn't sound completely made-up. Thomas even smiled at her, proud like a schoolboy who'd been complimented for doing well in class.

I had the slight hope that the new perex would be able to change his attitude. But it's all the same. Just a distant, vague feeling has emerged. It's a bit like taking a walk at night. You know how everything looks, you've seen the night so many times before. And in fact, nothing's really changed. The streets, the houses, the air. Everything in the neighborhood is the same. It's just the stars. They are so far away, and they have no meaning for you at all. They don't affect you, but still, they look very different.

Thomas is as foolish as he's always been, but of late I don't think about him that much. At times I almost forget he's there. For all I know, he might feel the same about me.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Assuming the procedure initially worked as planned, do you support this type of procedure? What are the best arguments for and against it?
2. What are the similarities and differences between having a conscious and the perex in the story?
3. What treatments are allowable for the treatment of mental illness? Are we justified in changing someone's identity against their will if they're a danger to society?
4. Is this case, does seemingly sentient AI have the right to ask to be terminated? Does sentient AI have the same or different "right to die" rules than humans?
5. Thomas's mother gave consent for the stimus medical procedure. How do you distinguish between medical procedures that require an underage individual's consent, the parents' consent, or consent from both before moving forward?

* * *

The Moral of Purse Snatching

Philip Reari

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Content Disclosure: Sexual Innuendo, Mild Language

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The cheeseburger was the first indication that the evening would not go as planned. Specifically, the act of ordering it. Not quite transgressive, but uncalled for and highly unusual. Everly's big brown eyes surged forward in their sockets when I informed the waiter what I'd be having.

"I thought you said you didn't eat red meat?" she asked after the clean-shaven young man departed with our order.

I explained that I occasionally made exceptions for restaurants.

"I haven't ordered a burger in at least three years," I added, sensing she wanted more. Her reaction expressed wonder, a good look for a second date. I was proving hard to pin down. She was proving intriguing enough to hold my interest. She asked why I decided to order one tonight. I told her perhaps because "burger" was in the name of the restaurant. Then our drinks arrived.

I nearly asked about the tattoo on her triceps as she lifted the sweaty pint glass to her mouth but caught myself. It was small, black, roundish and probably didn't have much of a backstory. Instead, I listened to her talk about her job at a policy think tank and how the current administration seemed intent on destroying so much hard-won progress. I more or less agreed with her but thought she gave too much credit to the system, which was rotten. I wondered if I should get into it; begin expounding on how everyone had their own selfish motivations and convenient justifications, or how out of touch people in the capital or other big cities are with the sentiments of most. It depended on what I wanted to get out of the date.

Everly leaned toward me with a conspiratorial grin. I liked looking at her teeth and had the fleeting urge to rub my tongue across them.

"Hey, isn't that the lieutenant party leader over there?" she said, her focus behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder. The restaurant was packed for the holiday weekend. The dark wooden interior and the stone accent wall gave the place a lodge-like ambiance. Servers briskly navigated the aisles as men in polo shirts and women in spring dresses blotted the place with bright colors. My eye stopped on the stiff-backed woman three tables closer to the entrance. She had on a tight blue dress and a face that displayed an artificial, almost unnatural expression that seemed to waver between displeasure and indifference. Her entourage included three other adults and a couple kids.

As I faced Everly, she said she despised the woman. This personal hatred was much more arousing in me than the disgruntled monologue she'd been swept up in before. I asked her why she loathed her so much.

"For starters, she's a total hypocrite more focused on manipulating the public than protecting it or doing anything helpful," she said, her nose twitching. "She's a bad person."

The mild-mannered server, who I now noticed had a thin pencil mustache, returned with our food. As I bit into the burger, a wildness surged within me. Without thinking, I reached under the table and put a hand on Everly's knee, my fingers splaying onto her thigh. She choked a little on her quinoa salad and asked what I thought I was doing. I ran my fingernails along her dark tights and took another bite out of the burger, which was more medium-rare than the medium I'd requested. A dribble of pink grease descended my chin. I removed my hand from Everly's leg and placed it on my thigh, which felt hard and cool compared to hers.

"I'm not a good person either," I said. "Not because of that—that was just messing around. My moral compass is kind of haywire. I thought you should know."

Everly straightened her skirt and collected herself. She seemed game to continue. I was curious how she'd react to my provocation.

"Oh yeah?" She reached over and dabbed my chin with her napkin. "A little heavy for a second date, but okay. Here's a question for you, then. Would you steal that woman's purse?"

My eyebrows rose in surprise and intrigue. I stole a lot as a kid until I got caught at the local drugstore with a pocketful of Pokémon cards and was grounded for a summer. I restrained myself after that but still submitted to the occasional urge to pick off a desirable piece of clothing or something nobody would miss. Then I turned eighteen and really couldn't risk shoplifting anymore. But this was different. I'd always had a knack for going unnoticed and doing things on the sly. Everly's question presented a true conundrum.

"Well, stealing is bad," I said. "And illegal." The adrenaline rushing through me squashed my appetite and I pushed the burger aside.

Everly nodded. "Of course. I'm only asking hypothetically. Is it okay to steal from a bad person?"

I told her I was okay with what Robin Hood did, but this wasn't exactly for a good cause. She laughed a little and said a lot of people, many of them perhaps poor, would get pleasure out of knowing this woman couldn't protect her own purse. "Is there a moral element to joy?" she asked. "Bringing joy to those who are suffering?"

I said I didn't think so but maybe. I looked back at the important woman and observed her purse resting on the floor against the leg of the table, highly exposed. Regardless of what Everly said, this was no hypothetical scenario.

Everly took out her phone and said we should ask the AI app on her phone. She typed in her question and read the response aloud.

"It is not acceptable to steal anyone's property, regardless of your feelings about their actions or policies. Theft is illegal and unethical, and responding to perceived harm with unlawful behavior undermines the principles of justice and accountability."

I told her to ask if what Robin Hood did was okay.

"That's a classic moral puzzle," she read aloud. "Whether what Robin Hood did is 'okay' depends on the lens you're using to judge his actions. Some people see him as a freedom fighter; others might call him a criminal with a cause. It really comes down to whether you think justice and fairness sometimes require bending or breaking the rules."

She put the phone down. "It says you could become a folk hero or a symbol of resistance."

I didn't really care about that, or much of what AI had to say on the subject, but it seemed to sway Everly toward approval. I asked her why she thought I could get away with it.

"Because you look sneaky," she said. "And I'm going to help you."

My god, who was this woman and what had the current government done to her moral compass? It was like the planet's moral poles had shifted, affecting everyone's ability to gauge right and wrong.

The waiter reappeared and asked if we needed to-go boxes. A huddle of people waited in the front of the restaurant to be seated. Even though we'd only partially finished our meals, we both said no. I felt Everly's hand on my thigh.

"Here's a face mask," she said. "Put it on. I'll trip on my way to the bathroom and they'll help me up. That's when you..." She made a rapid grabbing motion with her hand.

I suddenly grew paranoid. I realized I barely knew Everly. Our first date had been truncated because she "had to run." I'd assumed this meant she was uninterested, but then she messaged me two days later asking to meet again. What if she was setting me up somehow? She must've sensed the doubt creeping in because she yanked the mask away and said never mind.

“What the hell is going on with me?” she said. “I’m sorry. I’ve never done anything like this.”

She looked really confused and sore with herself. “It’s like, I can’t even think straight anymore.”

The desire to lick her glistening teeth struck me again. Meanwhile, my heart pumped like I was mid-sprint. I told her to give me the mask and go ahead to the bathroom. She observed me with incredulity as she handed it over and stood up.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I got this.”

I wanted to tell her I loved her because in that moment, I did. But I feared that would cause her to hesitate. I gripped the white disposable face mask in my hand and waited for the sound of her fall. When it came, I pivoted around, pulled the mask’s elastic bands around my ears, and glided through the restaurant, snatching up the purse as I went. I felt like Neo navigating the Matrix. Outside, I shoved the purse under my arm and marched home as fast as I could through the evening twilight, when the city appeared at its softest and most approachable. Within fifteen minutes, I was safe inside my house.

I never heard from Everly again, but she knew I was okay. My brazen theft made headlines and became fodder for many podcasts. Everybody said what I’d done was wrong, but they said it approvingly. I donated the money in the purse to the local church opposing the woman’s policies. I got a little Robin Hood tattoo on my ankle. Nobody ever asked me about it.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. How would you answer Everly's question: "Is it okay to steal from a bad person?" Do the details of what you are stealing or why the person is bad matter?
2. In this story, the narrator is stealing to impress his date; does his reason for stealing affect the morality of his actions? Does the fact that he gave the money to others matter? Does the fact that he got a Robin Hood tattoo mean, at least later, the act may have had a moral meaning for him?
3. Everly puts her hand on the narrator's knee, in part, to use sexuality to persuade him to commit a crime; does this matter in weighing her morality in the theft? How does her overall culpability compare to his?
4. Why do you think small political protests of this kind are not more common? Are there politicians whom you, personally, would go out of your way to do a small harm or inconvenience?
5. Is it ever appropriate to ask AI for ethical advice? Does it matter what information the AI is trained on? Does it matter what you are using the AI ethical advice for?

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Farang

Elizabeth Rose

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Content Disclosure: Sexual Innuendo; Mild Language

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The apartment, perched eleven floors above Sukhumvit, was rectangular and white. White walls, white sofa, white bed. The buildings surrounding the high-rise clustered in a combination of hovels and luxury condominiums, rooftop pools, balcony gardens, laundry lines, dirty linen curtains, and tall picture windows like her own. At dusk, particulates would paint the horizon red, fading into pinks and oranges like ripe fruits thrown against the skyscrapers. Humidity thickened the pigments until breathing was like drinking warm, sticky paint. On the hottest days, through the haze, the concrete buildings seemed to sway a little, melting.

One Friday evening, so hot she could hardly stand the ten-foot journey from the front door to the bedroom, she stripped off her slacks and blouse, turned the aircon up to max, and followed the fan's trajectory to the foot of the bed. Her skin, still damp with sweat, stuck to the cotton comforter. Sitting up to face the window, she searched for the light in the apartment across the alley. She pinched a book from her nightstand, stretched out, and peered over the page. The tenant who had moved in on Monday was still there. With the others, she'd tried to keep her watching merely curious, unintrusive. She averted her eyes when they changed clothes and observed their movements with furtive interest. But her will died with him. He was jarringly attractive, tall, lean, a *farang* passing through town for work, she figured, since he always wore a tie in spite of the heat. She liked his gait, the fold of his spine when he stretched in the mornings, the way he waited to take his socks off until just before slipping into bed.

All week, her evenings consisted of watching him, wanting him, pretending he wanted her, and pretending she wasn't watching him. After ten-hour days in a grayscale cubicle, she craved not a puff but a long drag of him, and the guilty voice in her head merely stoked the satisfaction of the transgression. He was a comfort to her in this place, the way strangers in hostel bunk beds need only their foreignness in common to sleep soundly. They were both *farang* who worked long days and spent their nights alone in tall buildings. That was enough to bond them, she thought.

Or it was, until he wasn't alone. Of course on a Friday night, the jarringly attractive man was not alone. He sat on the bed loosening his tie and beckoned someone from the doorway. A young Thai girl followed him into the light-soaked space, her head bowed, a short skirt revealing thin, long legs.

Sometimes the skytrain reeked with the sweat and cologne of bloated European retirees, their arms wound possessively around the tiny waists of Thai girls who should've been sitting in school, silk bows perched atop their ponytails. The child in this man's apartment looked no more than fourteen. He had at least twenty years and a hundred pounds on her. The imbalance was unsettling, but hardly uncommon for the city.

It made the watching woman fidget. She wanted to intervene, to reach across the alley with a wad of cash so that the girl's toothpick legs could carry her out of the apartment. Instead, she saw them tremble across the room as if the girl really were walking on stilts. There was no season, no sultry sway to her.

In two strides, the man swallowed the space between them. He swept up the girl's slight frame as though she weighed no more than a cat. In the same motion, he tossed her onto the frameless mattress, her limbs splaying at obtuse angles.

Across the alley, the watching woman froze. She felt her cheeks burn, a corkscrew twisting up into her stomach. For months now, she had diligently circumvented these scenes. On the BTS, on the street, even at the goddamn flower market she heard smug tourists compare their conquests, but she had been so careful not to walk down Soi Cowboy or into the spas with curtained back rooms. She didn't want to see twelve-year-olds passing for adults in the eyes of Americans too drunk to notice the difference. To be fair, she thought, it wasn't always easy to tell. The girl across the alley had hips half the width of her own, but that was hardly an indicator of age. Perhaps the girl was twenty-two and very well paid. Or even the *farang* man's lover. His girlfriend. The one he'd moved to Bangkok to marry. It was so easy to imagine the girl's age and her agency, to pick the preferable story.

Concern dissolved from the voyeur's gaze. Not all at once, not in a breath, but button by button as she followed the man's fingers down the front of his shirt. She wondered what he smelled like. Whether he and his young bride would honeymoon on Koh Tao or Koh Lipe. Whether they would sleep intertwined while she spooned a stack of pillows. Quietly, hungrily, envy climbed in. As if loneliness, with deft fingers and ample time, had braided itself into a rope.

The watching woman pried her eyes from the man's body, dragging them back to the book on her lap. She begged her mind to focus on the page in front of her, to forget, to flee. For forty minutes, she reread the same line of text. She imagined the *farang* man's grip on the girl's tiny hips, how hungry his fingers might be. She dug her nails into the pliant cover of the book.

Her eyes darted back across the alley.

The bright room was littered with discarded sheets and clothing. The *farang* man sat on the edge of the bed, his head cradled in his hands. Beside him, the girl's body looked even smaller. From a distance, she looked perfectly still.

Horror leaped down the throat of the woman at the window.

Her hand, of its own accord, scrambled to the nightstand in search of her cell phone, fumbled to tap the screen alive. Her fingertips hovered over the digits, hesitating. The only concern the police would translate from a foreigner was cash, she knew. And she was more certain of that than of what she'd seen. Her head was too heavy with heat. Wet and sticky, it had spraypainted over her vision, making everything colorful and nothing certain, just abstract graffiti in Rorschach shapes. She put the phone down and stood, pressing her forehead to the windowpane.

She urged the small body to shift, strained her eyes for any signs of the ribs' rise and fall. Willed the doll-like ankle to twitch. Nothing.

Suddenly, the man lifted his head. He scanned the alleyway, squinting across the dark with bright blue eyes. The woman at the window felt the pressure of his gaze find her skin, wandering from knee to neck. It was the most attention she'd felt in months. She lapped it up. Like a stray dog tonguing a puddle, aware it was dirty but too thirsty to stop. Something low in her stomach knotted while he looked at her. Eventually, the man rose and walked to the lamp. He shut out the light.

For the first time, she shut the curtains.

In all that dark, she could not sleep. Beside her, two blue beams bore into the thick fabric. They blinked. She yanked the router's wire from the socket and watched the white walls turn gray.

If he wanted, he could find her, she knew. It wouldn't be hard to count eleven windows up. The doorman would let any *farang* into the apartment building. The man's confidence and foreignness would obfuscate any questioning. She thought about the body on the bed. Her limbs tensed, wide awake, restless.

In the morning, when flashes of sun began to seep between the drapes, she did not part them. The room kept cooler with them closed. And there was comfort in the stillness, the silence but for the hum of the aircon.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the narrator assumed the Thai girl was murdered, rather than sleeping? What does this say about the narrator and her perspective?
2. What is it about setting stories like this in a foreign/exotic country that makes them seem both more surreal and more plausible? What does that say about us and our own perspective?
3. To what extent do details like the age and size difference of the couple across the way get a subconscious cultural pass? To what degree do we hold them to our own standards?
4. If you were the narrator in the story, would you have called the police about the potential murder? Does it matter that, even if there was a murder, it would likely be resolved with a bribe?
5. The lights were on and the curtains were open across the way. To what degree does that invite others to watch their exploits? To what degree does it require modesty in looking away from what is in plain sight?

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The Room Above

Joe Labriola

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Content Disclosure: Mild Language

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Day 0

For a moment, he had no thoughts. Just... observations... A blue hole. No—a window... Crystalline sky swelling through a big square gap in the otherwise plain white wall.

He blinked.

Was that sky out there? What was in *here*? Where was "here"?

He blinked several more times as if trying to lash away the grogginess. It certainly did little to dissipate the growing blur spots in his vision. How long had he been lying there, just staring? His body felt a little less limp than a rag doll, yet he managed to roll onto his other side to face away from the bright window. He didn't seem to mind his lack of bodily strength.

How long was I asleep for? he wondered instead, idly staring at the ceiling. This seemed farther away than the window had—

and much more pleasant to behold: a smooth dome dotted with fluorescent glow-lights. As his vision cleared, his gaze turned downward. There were many objects in the room, but they were dim and afar. Just distant shapes and shades of white. In fact, pretty much everything here was white. Or so he thought.

As he craned his neck back to follow the circular wall, he stopped suddenly. His eyes widened as they registered a jarring but remarkable span of swirling colors on the far side. More shockingly still, there was a figure sitting in a chair, facing the great painting.

He pressed his palms against the cool, padded floor and quivered onto his white-panted knees. It was only now that he noticed his outfit: plain, well-fitted linens without pockets.

Where am I? he wondered—and for the first time since apparently waking—scared.

He was still on his knees, shifting his weight forward onto his hands. His left index finger twitched on the sterile floor. He couldn't remember how he had gotten here. He couldn't remember anything. His arms buckled as if they might cave. He took a deep, shaky breath before rising slowly onto his bare feet.

"About time you got up," the figure across the room said but didn't turn around.

"Who-wh-who are you?" He was surprised at the immense effort he spent just to mumble these few words.

The figure's shoulders rolled as if he were drawing at the edge of the immense tapestry. "Call me Jack. You?"

He opened his dry mouth to answer but was silent.

My name? His heart thumped at the panicked realization. *What's my name?*

"It's okay," Jack said after a moment, almost a laugh in his tone. "I'm sure they'll brief you soon—before the day's over at least."

"They?"

"Yeah, I'd imagine so. Then again, I can only imagine why in the hell they put you up in here with me for."

"Who... who are you?"

"I told you already... Relax. You might as well take a good look around. This'll be your new home—at least for a little while. I mean who really knows with them."

"Where... where am I?"

"The hell if I know."

He turned slowly, feeling cold. There was a small white table in the middle of the room with two white chairs across from each other. On his right was a gray medicine ball and some silver tension ropes lying next to a frosted-glass-walled booth through which he could vaguely make out a shower, sink, and toilet. On his left was a pair of beds flanking a small handcart stuffed full of worn, yellowed books. And of course, in front of him was the immense artwork that Jack attended to.

The nameless man stared at the stunning expanse of bright chalky colors: sunset reds and orange rays all streaking and swirling around a yellow core hovering just above a twilit sea.

"What is it?" was all he could think to ask, forgetting his other confusions for the moment.

Jack sniffed a chuckle. "The sunset. What else?"

"It's... it's incredible..."

"Yeah..." Jack seemingly agreed, though his tone was plainer now. "Yeah, it really is something, isn't it?"

"Where are we?"

Jack's hunched back stiffened. "They're coming..." he said, just above a whisper.

"What?"

Jack spun around in his seat before slumping down onto the floor and leaning back. His shaggy auburn hair fluffed up against the mural. "Trust me..." he said, before closing his eyes. He seemed neither frightened nor concerned. "Just sit down. You don't want to keel over and smack your noggin."

Then the nameless man heard it. That soft, airy hiss... "What is that?" he asked, turning around and around. "What is that?"

"Trust me..." Jack said, waving his hand over a small floor vent as if stoking an invisible flame. The man hadn't noticed dozens of grille-covered openings along the base of the wall.

He blinked as his vision spotted again. *Oh god.* His mind grew heavy. *Heavier*. He was weak. Tired. So tired... "What...?" he asked. "What's... happening?" He collapsed onto his knees and began crawling toward the blaring blue window with all his waning strength. "What...?"

This must just be a dream... he vaguely thought as he faded. *Just some nightmare...*

"*Just...*" he mumbled, reaching up toward the brimming sunlight. But then he fell, dark and silent.

Day 1

The nameless man opened his eyes. He felt surprisingly lucid, which is why he blinked, tight and long, unsure if the plain-faced figure in the lab coat sitting across from him, staring back through his tiny circular reading glasses, was really there.

He glanced up at the mural across the room. The bright colors were still all there, but Jack was gone.

The man tried to move his arms, but his wrists and legs were bound to the chair by black plastic straps.

"Good afternoon," the lab-coated figure said, blandly. He was pale, thinnish, and balding; with just the average amount of middle-aged flab sagging from his neck and belly.

"Who are you?"

The other looked down at a flat computer pad balanced easily in his right palm. "Please try to relax."

The nameless man just stared at him for a moment and then asked again, "Who are you?"

"Doctor Phillips," he answered, deeply focused on his computer screen. "A pleasure to meet you."

"Why... why can't I remember anything?"

"You were heavily sedated. For quite some time." Doctor Phillips glanced above his reading glasses. "Do you remember anything? Anything at all? Other than when you awoke earlier in this room, I mean?" He held his beady eyes there, waiting.

"No..." the nameless man said after a few seconds of thinking, trying. But he recalled nothing. No nightmares. No dreams. No... anything. "I..." he began. "I can't. What's going on? Why can't I remember...?" A thought suddenly came to him. "Where's... *Jack*?"

Doctor Phillips smirked. "Jack is fine. He's been moved to a separate chamber while we conduct our intake."

"Intake?"

"Yes," he said, placing the computer screen down and then folding his hands together on the table between them. "Welcome to the white room."

The nameless man glared at him. "Where am I?"

"You're in a holding cell. On the outside, we call them 'waiting stations' to appease at least *some* of the moderates. But the media eats up both sides of the issue, as I'm sure you can imagine." The doctor actually chuckled.

"Is… is this…?"

Doctor Phillips tilted his head. "What…? Hell?" He paused, seeming to savor the scattered, stony look etched on the man across from him. After a breath, the doctor just chuckled again. "No," he said, rising from his seat. "No, you're not in hell." He locked his fingers behind his back and drifted around the table toward the room's sole window. "I've read through your files. A very unique situation… but these cases always are. I bet you never thought that you'd end up here of all places; but then again, most never do."

"But *where* are we?" the man demanded, now shaking within his restraints.

He heard the doctor scoff a sniff from behind him. "You know, it's funny. Some used to say you could erase the mind, but of course, you can never really erase the man—who someone truly is. Until now, of course."

"What?"

"Although it seems frivolous at this point in time, federal law still dictates that I grant you your right to choose whether you want to know. Otherwise, you're legally allowed to proceed with this whole process blindly, if you so wish. I'm not supposed to sway your decision either way, but for what it's worth 'off the record,' there seems like little to be gained from hearing the whole thing. Then again, I suppose I couldn't help myself from wanting to know."

"*Want* to know?" The man twisted his neck but was barely able to glimpse the doctor now bordering the blue light of the window. “Want to know *what*?”

“The truth.”

There was a long silence. “What truth?”

“Of why you’re here. Of how you got here and where you’ll be going... of at least some of the many questions that I’m sure you have right now.”

He could hear Doctor Phillips stepping back toward the table. “All right then,” the nameless man said. “I want to know. Please. Tell me. Where am I?”

“You’re in a facility like I said.” The doctor returned to the other side of the table. He placed his hands on each corner. “Welcome to your final stay in prison.”

“My what?”

“I’m also not legally allowed to recount any of the court proceedings other than the outcome. And so, simply put: You were tried. In a court of law. Then convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.”

“What?” The nameless man almost laughed at this. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“Some years ago, now,” Doctor Phillips began, folding his hands behind his back again before drifting over toward Jack’s mural, “the federal government started a program with the goal of integrating criminals back into society in the cheapest, most cost-effective way possible. Their research concluded two important points. The first was that the most efficient way to rehabilitate the incarcerated population was to make them feel as if they are truly a part of something larger: a job, a church, a society that needs them. That sort of thing. The second was that in our modern era this could be done rather cleverly and very cheaply.

"Researchers developed a method, one called 'scatrocity,' in which participants' minds could be wiped clean of all previous memories, actions, motivations, et cetera. Furthermore, they also developed a process in which *new* memories could be implanted into one's mind. Good memories. They concluded that these such 'alter-memories' would, effectively, eliminate the tendencies that led to a criminal's adverse behavior. It's the age-old question of nature versus nurture, and a clever solution to sort of alter both."

"I... I don't get it..."

"Of course you do. It's really not that difficult to understand—only to accept—which I understand is very difficult for many."

"So... so you're saying that I'm a criminal then?"

"No no no. You *were* a criminal—until you were convicted and then sentenced to this program."

"Program?"

"Yes." The doctor paused, staring up at the great work before him. "After many years of trial and error—as comes with most of mankind's greatest achievements—they perfected a process in which we can now—and quite regularly do—replace a convict's memories before replacing them back into the world again."

"So that's it then? It's... it's all just... gone?"

"If by *it* you mean your former life, then yes. It's effectively been 'erased from the books' as they say."

The nameless man's breath picked up. "This... this is... this can't be real."

"Oh, rest assured, this is all very real. As real as this great painting here. Well, chalk drawing, really." He drew a finger along one of the yellow rays bursting out from the center. “But it’s still quite a remarkable piece, isn’t it?”

“WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME?”

The doctor dropped his hand to his side but continued silently studying Jack’s picture.

“TELL ME!” the nameless man erupted, vibrating within his restraints. His forehead beaded with sweat. His heart raced. His left index finger twitched furiously again. *What did they do to me?*

“Getting upset won’t change anything. It’s too late now. You’re already in the waiting station. I’m sorry. But everything that you used to be is gone forever—as if it had never existed to begin with. Trust me; you should be very glad for it.”

“That can’t be true…”

“Oh, I’m very certain that it is.”

“What the hell is a waiting station? What am I waiting for?”

“Memory restoration, and then finally, reintegration.”

“Why…? Why are you doing this?”

The doctor turned around to face him. “I’m not doing anything,” he said, starting back slowly. “If you can please remain calm, I can finish explaining everything quite quickly.”

The nameless man was silent. He unclenched his fists, but his teeth grated softly.

“Once the feds realized that they could save billions of dollars a year by *not* housing, feeding, and clothing criminals, they were eager to continue with the program. Why pay for a man’s room and board and health care for fifty, sixty, sometimes seventy years when you can release him safely back into the world at a fraction of the cost? Everybody wins. The fed saves money, the criminal is reborn to live among the free once more, and society gets back another hardworking contributor."

"Impossible..." the nameless man said. "You can't just wipe people's minds of their... of their memories... They'll remember. They remember eventually."

"Oh, quite the contrary. Sure, in the program's early stages, there were some... hiccups—like I said, there always are—but overall, the success rate is excellent now. In fact, over the past seven years the crime rate for returners is actually *lower* than that of the average citizen. At this point we're technically releasing a better-quality individual. The protesters lose their minds when you point out that little fact. But again, fact is fact."

"So that's it then? You just steal somebody's old life and then give them a new one?"

"If you care to think of it that way, then yes." The doctor reached the chair and sat. "But I like to think of it as... a fresh new start."

"But won't people know? Won't others know who you are? What you've done?"

"Surprisingly not as often as you might think. That actually hardly ever happens. The program takes significant pains to ensure that you'll be placed somewhere far from anyone you might have ever known. You'll wake up in your new apartment—a bit groggy, yes, and perhaps confused over the prior few days' events, but such confusions will fade quickly as you continue on with your life. You were the child of a single mother who died in a tragic car accident when you were in your early twenties... You can't visit her grave... Her ashes were cremated and scattered out in the ocean, as per her request. You'll have a job to go to. It's all taken care of for you. To all of your neighbors, coworkers, new people you meet, new loves and lives you make, you're just starting out as the new guy in town."

"What about old friends? Won't it be just a little bit strange that I don't know *anybody* from before?"

The doctor smiled. "There are fellow 'newborns'—as we call them—all over the world. Plenty of others just like you, rejoining society every day. The program syncs your memories with some of them so that you'll have old buddies to call, even meet up with to chat about the good old college days, high school romances, et cetera. I assure you, it's quite a genius and foolproof system at this point."

"Well then, why am I here? Why aren't I back out there? What's the purpose of all of this now?"

"Legally, we can't keep you subdued or unconscious for more than twenty-four hours at a time, I'm afraid. And these things do take time. For you, a year and a half. In fact..." he said, tilting his head as he tapped on his small computer screen, "five hundred and fifty-seven more days after today, if you'd like to keep track. Some find it comforting to count down the days. In the meantime, we'll be organizing everything for you: lining you up with work, a residence, other newborns to mingle memories with. But until all of that is finished with, you'll remain here."

"But... but why did you already make me forget everything? Why not just wait until I'm ready to leave?"

"We find that it greatly helps the replanting process if you have been wiped clear of your previous life for at least a year before reintegration. Gives us more of a 'blank slate' to work with, if you will."

"This... this is sick... you can't do this."

"I'm sorry, but this is just how things are."

"This isn't right! I don't even know what I did! I never agreed to any of this."

"Actually, *you're* the one who signed up for the program. Rather than face a life sentence behind bars, you chose to forget. The decision was yours and you alone chose this path."

"How do I know you're telling me the truth?"

Doctor Phillips looked him in the eyes, almost with pity. "What do you think?"

The nameless man turned his face away in silence. After a moment, he finally stared up at the doctor and asked, "Well, what did I do?"

"I already told you: I can't answer that question."

"Why not?"

"Federal law, I'm afraid."

He thought for a few seconds. "What's my name then?"

"I'm afraid that I can't tell you that either."

"Federal law?"

"I'm afraid so."

The nameless man actually chuckled. "Okay then, what in the world am I supposed to call myself?"

Doctor Phillips shrugged. "How about John?"

"Is that really my name? Or are you just suggesting it?"

The doctor smiled now. "Whichever you prefer."

* * *

The white room was dimmer than it had appeared earlier; the encircling lights now cast a grayer scene. John rose from the floor onto his stiff legs and pressed his cold hands against the cool, plastic window panel on the wall. He must have been unconscious for a while judging from the moonless night enveloping a black sea that stretched out far below and beyond his sight.

"You'll get used to it," a mellow voice called from across the room.

John turned around and saw Jack, sitting cross-legged with his back up against his great picture. Right where he had been last.

"What happened?" John asked.

"You were asleep."

"For how long?"

Jack shrugged. "Beats me. I only woke up maybe five minutes ago. But then again, what the hell's a minute worth in this damn place anyways?"

The last thing John remembered was fading again—that tiredness that had suddenly engulfed his mind and body. Doctor Phillips had explained how he had been drugged right before their meeting with a time-release capsule that would render him unconscious in just a few more minutes. John had tried to ask as many questions as quickly as possible before the dullness finally conquered his senses.

Where will I go when I get out? he had asked.

I'm afraid that I can't tell you that, the doctor had answered.

Why... why not just... kill us...?

That would be highly unethical and unlawful. We're not a police state. We're a civilized people...

Is this... is this... all... just a... dream...?

Only if you prefer it to be...

And now he was awake again. Here. Still in this dimmed white room.

"Where did he go?" John asked.

“Where did *who* go?”

“Doctor Phillips? When did he leave?”

“Wish I could help, pal. But I really have no idea who the hell you’re talking about.”

John stepped over to the table between them. “He was here though. Where’s the door? How did he get out?”

“So they briefed you then?”

“Yeah... yeah, they did... Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“Everything. The program. Us. This place... is it really all true?”

Jack sighed. “You probably should have asked this so-called ‘Doctor Phillips’ of yours that.”

“I did. But he just... laughed.” John sat in the chair.

Jack sniffed and stood up. “Sounds just like them. I think they actually like to play games with us.” He tapped a finger on his temple and raised his eyebrows. “Screw with your mind. I don’t think they’re evil or anything like that, but they’re sure no angels neither.”

“This can’t be happening...” John said, gripping the sides of the table.

“I told myself the same thing,” Jack said as he rose and walked toward him. “At least for the first few weeks. First, I figured that it was all just some dream—the most real nightmare you could ever imagine. Then, it was hell. Must be it? Right? Don’t worry though, it really does get easier as time goes on.”

“How long have you been here for?

“Oh... just about six months, I’d say. How long they tell you you’re in for?” Jack took the seat across from him.

“About a year and a half. Five hundred and... fifty-seven days, I think he said."

"You have a good memory," Jack said with a hearty laugh. "Sounds about right in any event. Way for them to be specific only about the things that really aren't worth a damn."

"Well, how did he get in here? How did he get out?"

Jack laughed again. "I think I'm gonna like rooming with you."

John just gazed at him, failing to find any of the same humor his counterpart seemed to be enjoying.

"You think if I knew I'd be sitting here right now making small talk with you? Nothing personal, of course."

"So that's it? They just gas you every time they have to talk to you?"

"That's the drill—though they only ever talked to me for their 'intake.' You're the first soul I've seen in months. Thought I might've actually been losing my mind here for a while. Oh, and I don't know if he explained already but they gas us six times a day for meals: three to bring them in, three to take away the dishes. Pretty much on schedule every day. Believe me; it's really not that bad. It's better to just relax. It's actually kind of nice to just close your eyes and wake up to a full dinner plopped right down in front of you. Too bad you just got here. You missed enchiladas last night."

John's finger started twitching, tapping on the cold plastic. He stood up. "There's gotta be a door or a secret entrance or something," he said as he rushed over to the bare wall. He started combing its seamless surface with his chilly fingers. "There has to be some way out of here."

"Of course there is," Jack said. "You better start counting down."

Day 2

John's roommate was nice enough to give him what he called a "house tour" on that first night. The bed by the wall was Jack's. John was welcome to read any of the one hundred forty-seven books from the cart. Diverse texts including fiction, history, and even one on telegraphy and another on art analysis. Jack had counted them, but he refused to read any. *What was the point?* he said. Also, there was a single, leather-bound notebook with a ballpoint pen tucked inside. Jack told John he could feel free to write in it if he wanted to. Jack said he had started a diary months ago but after his first few entries he couldn't feel the point of it anymore and hadn't written anything since.

Jack was snoring softly while John gazed wearily up at the gray glow lights, unable to will himself to rest after everything that had happened today. Eventually, he reached over to the book cart, took the journal, and flipped through the first few pages. Jack had actually only ever made one entry—a single line on the second page, his blotty ink surrounded by clear paper:

What did you really forget?

For some reason, John had thought that he himself would have plenty to write, but instead he just stared at the next blank white page. His finger tapped nervously on the side of the notebook. Eventually, something came to mind. He wrote it down:

Who was I?

He thought about this answerless question for a long while, surely into the early morning of the next day, before finally passing into sleep. But John would come to write down logs of most days: different workout routines, the weather out the square window over the endless blue sea, his discussions with Jack, reflections on their "situation," and so on.

It helped pass the time.

Days 3–362

Jack was right. The gassings did become easier to give in to. John learned to sense them approaching: that soft roiling inside the walls, vibrating and rising into an unfurling sizzle from the floor vents before spreading throughout the air and filling their lungs. Sometimes they would sit at the table to awaken with fresh steaming meals laid out in front of them. These meals were the only real events of excitement in their day. They soon started betting their desserts over what dishes would be served for breakfast, lunch, and dinner (there were only a handful of different offerings for each meal). Whoever guessed the most meals right won. If no one won, then their desserts went to themselves.

"It definitely feels like a chicken parm kind of day," Jack would sometimes wake in the morning and say as he stretched out his limbs.

"Based on what?" John would ask.

"I don't know. Just a feeling."

Jack won more often than John.

They had many theories, of course, and spent many days trying to figure out a pattern to the meal selection. John thought there might be a larger cycle—one that would present itself over time if they kept track long enough. Contrastingly, Jack abided by his theory that there was no trend at all for them to measure. Instead, he claimed that the doctors knew that they would try to puzzle out a rhyme or reason to the randomly selected meals. They might have even taken bets themselves about what theories the roommates would argue about. They were watching them right now with cameras, listening to them with microphones hidden in the walls and ceiling, Jack believed.

One time, John asked Jack if that was the reason why he was painting his great work of art: to draw over their covert equipment.

Jack had just chuckled and kept on drawing.

They also often wondered about who they might have once been and what they had done to earn their lives here. They wondered if they had really wanted all of this now, and if they had really chosen to forget their crimes and whatever else might have passed in their wretched past lives so that they could have truly fresh starts. Had they been sure that this was the right way? Maybe they had known that this was the *only* way? Maybe this really was the best life left for them?

They spent a lot of time trying to figure out what they actually remembered from before they got here and why. They hadn't forgotten everything, after all.

"I was lucky to ask about that in my intake," Jack explained one day while dashing some more red streaks near the center of his painting. "Which is funny because it wasn't the most important thing on my mind at the time. But I remember, I asked him, 'Well then how the hell do I know how to talk or remember any words?'

"And he said a bunch of stuff about how they do this thing called 'selective deletion.' Something like that they can get rid of the specific events that happened in your life but your mind holds onto the associations of them. So that's why we remember how to talk—how we know the difference between chicken Francese and cream of broccoli for dinner. It's how we know what the hell a house looks like, even if we can only picture it like a little blue box with four windows and a door. So they leave those things for us. He said it helps with the process—for when we get our new memories."

Jack said all this while immersed in his mural. The great scene had grown over the months. The blue sea below the bright setting sun now spanned nearly half of the white room's encircling wall—its colorful fingers spreading almost from the shower to the window.

"Looks different than the sunset out the window," John mentioned once during dinner. He noticed that Jack never really looked out the window. Then again, it wasn't like there was much to see besides the endless ocean. "It's like brighter, somehow, even though it's not real."

Jack just smirked and said, "Heh, who said anything is real?"

Days 363–366

Things continued on mostly like this for a long while, until finally, it had been about one year since John had awoken in the white room. Every once in a while, they would be gassed other than when their keepers brought them their meals and took away the scraps. Of course neither of them knew *why* these extra events occurred—except whenever they awoke to discover each other with trimmed hair, freshly shaven faces, and neatly cut nails (there were no scissors or any other sort of sharp metal objects in the white room). Other times, the plastic laundry bucket molded onto the side of the shower would be empty when they awoke after meals. They would find freshened clothes and bath towels and soaps when they pulled open the pair of silver-knobbed doors to the small cabinet under the sink. But was there ever anything more to it than just grooming and house cleaning? Were they tested on? Analyzed? Altered?

They had many theories.

And even though neither of them ever brought it up, they both knew that one day one of them would wake up alone.

John wrote about this and much else in his journal: like how neither of them ever had any dreams, even though they knew what dreams were. He wrote about the seasonal angle of the sun as it set over the ocean and the few times they noticed small, glimmering boats sailing by in the far distance like slow-motion shooting stars. Jack made lots of jokes about waving these boats over to bust the two of them loose from here.

Other than that, life just went on. There really wasn't much to argue about, except for one day—the one real fight that the two of them ever really got into. John remembered it clearly. It had been a silly discussion about the window and why it was there.

"I told you," John said. He sat at the table with his book *Of Mice and Men* now closed in his lap. "It's to show us that there's actually a world out there, somewhere. A world we'll be back in soon."

"You're wrong," Jack said. "How do you even know that the damn window is real?"

"What are you talking about?"

"How can you tell that it's even *real*? That it's not just a picture pasted on the other side? A TV playing the same goddamn thing every day?"

"That's ridiculous. You know that doesn't make sense. Plus, why would anyone do that?"

"Why?" Jack asked and then paused. His amber eyes darted around their seamless boundaries. "WHY ANYTHING!"

he shouted. "Why this goddamn room!" He grabbed his chalk bucket and wailed it across the room, sending the chalk sticks exploding in a powdery bang against the base of the white wall. His rage left a bright patch of confused colors layering where the white plastic bucket had cracked into two jagged-edged halves.

John just stared at the mess as Jack slumped with his back against his mural. "I want out!" he cried, his breath racing as he slid down onto the plain matting. "YOU HEAR ME YOU BASTARDS. I WANT OUT!"

The gas soon overtook them.

When they awoke, John first looked up and saw that the window was blackened. He jumped up and rushed over, panting. *What if it's gone?* was all that he thought. *What if it's gone?* But then he exhaled a long, relieved sigh at seeing that the ocean was shining deep and silvery under the three-quarters moon. The sun must have set a while ago. Dinner was sitting on the table like normal: a cheeseburger on a white plastic plate, their white plastic utensils tucked inside of their white paper napkins, and a small side bowl with a hearty helping of steamed broccoli. It was all lukewarm, including the pudding dessert. John had guessed chunky soup; Jack, pasta and meatballs.

John noticed that the bucket and the smashed chalk bits and the stain on the wall were all gone. The explosion had been wiped clean white.

But the mural was still there, Jack still sitting with his back against his great work, his eyes just now opening.

Days 367–388

After his incident with the chalk, Jack needed to find a new hobby. He often complained loudly about how he deserved his chalk back; he would sometimes yell at the ceiling as if they might actually listen. But the two never awoke to find a new bucketful. John often thought about mentioning to Jack how he was lucky that they hadn't wiped away his entire picture too.

Then again, Jack could only act so serious for so long. "Sure, the edges could use some more work," he said one day, looking at the wall over his shoulder from the table. "But I guess what's done is done."

To fill his time, Jack started staring out the window more. It turned out that he liked standing in the fading rays of the ocean sunset. They decided that it was spring, judging from the extended daylight. They decided a bunch of things. They knew the phases of the moon and even the cycles of some of the stars. They could tell that there were seasonal patterns of air traffic from the thin vapor trails of the high, misty jet planes and rocket ships.

"Wherever we are, it's not far from the equator," Jack was staring out the window one day when he said this across the room to John, who paused in his reading to sit up and arch an eyebrow.

"How in the world do you know that?"

"I really don't know," Jack said and then sighed as he turned to stare out through the window once again. "Just a feeling I have."

Day 389

During their early months they had sometimes imagined together about who they had been: bank robbers or cyber terrorists, con artists or vigilante journalists, among many other possibilities. But as the months passed, they eventually began discussing who they would become in their new lives instead—

maybe bankers or computer programmers; painters or novelists, Jack joked, among many other possibilities. In fact, this was exactly what they were discussing that one night at supper with the glow lights above already dimmed.

Jack laughed. "I dunno..." he said, leaning back in his chair. He had just told John about how he was going to buy a boat when he got back out into the world; he was sure that he'd love sailing, that he'd love drinking and wooing gorgeous women. He had some great pickup lines all ready to go—he was sure that he would come up with some great ones again. "All I know is that I can't wait for a damn beer, whether I remember it or not."

John chuckled. He knew exactly what his friend meant. "Amen to that."

Jack had just finished eating and waited silently until John was almost done with his dinner.

"There's something I have to tell you," he finally said, taking a breath.

John kept his eyes down while chewing his mouthful of chicken parmesan. "Yeah?"

"Tomorrow," Jack said before folding his hands next to his empty white dish. "My time's up."

John swallowed and then looked up at Jack.

Jack just stared back at him. They had both known this day was coming.

"So... I guess that's it then?"

"Yeah... yeah, for me at least. I guess."

John wiped his mouth with his napkin. He didn't feel like finishing his last few bites or eating either of the two red Jell-O cups he had won. He just sighed into his chair. "I guess it's all got to end eventually, right?" he said as brightly as possible. But for the first time since his first few days here, he felt a nervous, anxious fear of forward reality gripping at his chest. He noticed his left index finger twitch that strange, irksome tic for the first time in many, many months. He took a breath and flexed his hand.

“How much longer do you have?” Jack asked.

John sighed again and said, “A hundred sixty-eight. A hundred and sixty-eight more days… I’ve been marking mine down in the journal. How’d you keep track of yours?” This was the first time that question had come up.

Jack tapped the side of his head. “It’s all in here.”

John chuckled weakly. “Ah man, well, I’m sure going to miss you,” he said, swept his eyes down, and then raised his plastic cup of water to toast before taking a drink. “To the good old times.”

Jack smiled and then drank from his cup too. “I’ll miss the view,” he said, staring at that dark square blotch on the wall just over John’s shoulder and then turning to his mural. “I think.”

They didn’t talk about it anymore that night. They didn’t hug or say goodbye or talk about the past—the good times or the bad. The fact was that neither of them had any idea exactly *when* Jack would be taken away—*only* that he would.

The rest of the evening went by as normal. They took their regular turns showering and changing. John read for a while; Jack stared out onto the nightfall sea. And then as they both lay in their cots, the glow lights now just fluorescent hums in the gray sky above, Jack spoke through the darkness.

“Thanks,” he said.

John sighed. “Yeah. You too, Jack. Thanks for everything.”

After a moment, his friend added, “Hey, who knows…

maybe they'll make us roommates once you get out too? Newborns together."

John sniffed a thoughtful chuckle. "Hm. Yeah. Maybe they will."

It seemed silent for a while.

"You know," Jack started, "the picture I've been drawing?"

"Yeah?"

"Well," he lowered his voice to a wispy hum, "I have a secret that I don't want them to know about."

"Really?" John lowered his voice too.

"Yeah. Wanna know?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"It's not a sunset."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It's my own window," Jack explained. "To see out the other side of this place to the sunrise."

John lay there and thought about that for a while. He imagined what it would be like—if the sunrise really looked like the mural did. But before he could think of what to say, the gas had silently seeped back in through the darkness, permeating his already drifting thoughts. This time he really didn't even notice it.

When John opened his eyes again, it was day. The clear blue sky filled the window across the room and the circular lamps above were bright and big like a ring of occult suns. But the cot on the other side of the book cart was empty. The white sheets were perfectly made.

Jack was gone.

John sat up in his bed, his eyes scanning every curve of that hollow chamber. But Jack was definitely gone, and John knew that. And he actually hadn't noticed *it* right away, or maybe his heart had just forced his mind to ignore it at first, but Jack's mural had been wiped clean away too. The white wall was now bare—a clean slate like the rest of this uniform casing encircling him, except for that lone window looking out onto the clear sky and shining sea.

John lay his head back down on the cool white pillow.

He closed his eyes and lay there. He cried for the first time he could remember and continued to for what seemed like a very long time.

Days 390–530

John's notebook markings reminded him that he was only three months away himself. Three more months and then this would all be behind him. Forever. It was inevitable. It was as if it had already happened and he was just waiting to get to where he truly belonged. Life went on like normal, or normal enough now that he was all alone. But the days seemed to move by much slower with only himself for counsel—with only his own mind in the white room. It made sense to have roommates for comfort here. But then, for whatever reason, exactly twenty-seven days before his time was up, while he was in his bed reading, the gas arrived. Of course, John simply laid his book aside, folded his hands on his stomach, and closed his eyes. He was just about due for a haircut, after all. But when he awoke, there was someone lying, all white-robed like himself, over by the sole window.

John actually chuckled to himself for a short moment before getting back to his book. Not long after, he heard a shivering voice call from across the room.

"W-w-who are you?" the man asked. John glanced at him:

thin, dark-haired, and clean-shaven, barely managing to stay up on his quivering legs.

John looked back down to finish his paragraph.

"Relax," he said, setting the book on the cart, folding his hands, and closing his eyes once more. "I'm sure that they'll explain everything soon."

"Th-they?"

"Trust me," John said, sensing it coming. "Just sit down. You don't want to fall over on your face."

"But why… why would I f-fall?"

John heard the man's knees and hands slap the mats.

"W-wha…?" the weakening words came. "W-what's… happening…?"

"Shh…" John said, also growing groggy, heavy, calm, still. "Just relax… I promise it'll be all right…" He breathed in slowly.

"Bu… bu…" the man began, but faded. "Who…? Who are you…?"

"Just a friend." John just smiled peacefully as his soul gave in. "You can call me Jack…"

* * *

Jack explained everything after they awoke. His new roommate's name was John. Jack answered all of John's questions—all of them that he knew the answers to anyways. He didn't notice until after their initial conversation was almost done that there was a new white bucket full of colorful chalk right in front of where the sunrise had once bloomed. Jack said John could feel free to draw on the walls if he liked. Jack preferred to read.

And so, the countdown continued. He didn't tell John when he would be leaving, even when there was only one week left. When the question came up, Jack explained that he had simply lost track somewhere along the long way. It wouldn't happen for a while, though, he told him. But that was a lie. He wondered about when he should let his new roommate know the truth. He had to, didn't he? He couldn't *not* tell him and then just disappear one day. That wouldn't be right. That wouldn't be fair to anyone.

But what was fair anymore? Jack had found himself spending more and more of the daylight hours just staring out the window onto the greater view. For some reason, he had lost the will to write in his journal in recent weeks. There were still a few blank pages for him to fill in before he left here, but what was the point? Ever since his new roommate had arrived, Jack had begun trailing with his daily entries—slackening from an entire page a night, to half, to a paragraph or two, and then last week (the last thing he had written) he copied a line that someone before him had scribbled in black ink on the last blank page of one of the books: *Cat's Cradle.*

"Veritas vos liberabit," they had scrolled across the middle. For some reason he liked these strange words even though he had no idea what they meant.

New John didn't take up the chalk. He liked to read like Jack, who was happy to make recommendations from among the one hundred forty-seven books. But Jack didn't really care about books or words or stories anymore. In less than a week, he would close his eyes one final time. And then he would awaken. A new man, in a new world, with a new life. Whatever he thought or felt about all of this now wouldn't matter. It didn't matter. It would all be a distant dream that he couldn't remember, as if none of this had ever really happened at all.

Maybe this is all just a dream, Jack thought and smirked as he spread his hands against the white wall framing the window and stared outside. It was another clear day and the sun was only moments away from starting to disappear below the faraway curve of sky and sea. By now he felt more or less at peace with what was happening—with what would happen in just another week. What other choice did he have? It was better this way.

And maybe he would even be reunited with his old friend once on the outside?

That was certainly something to hope for, for whatever that was worth.

As Jack took a deep breath, his left hand started twitching again. Jack glanced at his finger fidgeting against the wall. He squeezed his grip open and closed to try to stretch out the spasming muscles, but as soon as he rested his hand back on the blank surface, it started again. He sighed long and heavy. For a great while, he had forgotten about this odd tic that had mostly ceased after his first few days in the white room. But almost as if his body knew that his time was almost done here—ever since that dinner when his friend had told him he was leaving—that strange twitching had returned and now sprung up more often each day—sometimes as he lay reading at night, sometimes in the shower, and of course, now while staring out the lone window.

Jack tried to ignore this irritating quirk again, but with the sun halfway below the sparkling boundary of his known world, he noticed a bright speck on the faraway calm, just floating there on the glassy water. It must have been another boat, flickering white flashes of dying daylight in random reflections.

But right when Jack was just about to turn away, knowing that the boat was as far from his reach as anything else out there in the real world right now, he instinctively shifted his left hand up against the cool window.

The same pattern of flickering light continued even while the sun faded and the night drew up. Quick and short flashes came into his eyes and then abruptly stopped.

Jack finally realized that he wasn't twitching at all. He was tapping, almost as if in answer to the boat's signal.

Signal... he thought, amazed.

Tapping... Tapping... Tapping...

The darkness stretched on for a long moment...

And then the boat's light tapped back.

* * *

This story is a part of our legacy-of-excellence program, first printed in the After Dinner Conversation—September 2021 issue.

Discussion Questions

1. When they first meet, the doctor says you can erase the mind, but “you can never really erase the man—who someone truly is.” Do you agree with this statement? Are we more than the sum of our memories? How would you know? How might you test this theory?
2. The doctor also says, “The most efficient way to rehabilitate the incarcerated population was to make them feel as if they are truly a part of something larger: a job, a church, a society that needs them.” Do you agree or disagree? Is the most efficient form of rehabilitation always the most desirable?
3. If you could choose between twenty years in prison or having your memory cleaned and starting a new life in eighteen months, which would you choose and why? What would be your prison time cutoff where you would prefer to do the time, rather than have your memory cleaned and start over?
4. Assuming this was available, what crimes would you allow, or not allow, this punishment to be used for? Are there some crimes that a person shouldn’t be allowed to forget?
5. Do you consider the voluntary procedure in the story to be a humane, or inhumane, punishment option? Is this society moving forward or back?

* * *

Author Information

A Plaintive Note

Vern Bryk is a writer in Parma, Ohio. He previously worked as a journalist and magazine editor. He has also self-published a novel titled *Delusions of Clarity*, which concerns the ethical dilemmas of a police psychologist. *www.vernbryk.com*

The Dinner

Anton Ivan Botha is a South African writer, UN professional, and unapologetic fan of moral gray zones. A Fulbright Scholar with a PhD in applied social sciences from Durham University, he splits his time between shaping global public institutions and crafting stories that poke at philosophical pressure points. His fiction explores the space where science, ethics, and absurdity meet—usually over dinner. Instagram @*antonibotha* and X (Twitter) @*antonibotha*

The Wife

Veronica Zora Kirin is an anthropologist, author, and entrepreneur. She is the founder of Asterisk Women's Health and cofounder of *Anodyne Magazine*, both of which advocate for health equity for all. Her writing can be found in publications such as *Business Insider* and *Maddyness*. Find more of her work on all platforms @*vmkirin*; *www.veronicakirin.com*

Ground Control

Martin Riemer is a neuroscientist at the Technical University Berlin, where he leads a research project on the perception of time and space. His first novel *Post Mortem* was published in 2018. *www.martinriemer.com*

The Moral of Purse Snatching

Philip Reari is a writer and editor based in Washington, D.C. His fiction and journalism have graciously been published by *Dissent, KayTell Ink, Kyoto Journal, n+1, The Rumpus, Wired*, and others. He's written two novels, *Eat Your Damn Vegetables* (2022) and *Earth Jumped Back* (2024). *www.philipreari.com*

Farang

Elizabeth Rose is a former university administrator. "Farang" is her first piece of fiction. She's currently working on a novel.
Instagram @*elizabethrosewrites*

The Room Above

Joe Labriola is a writing professor at Stony Brook University in New York. His fiction writing focuses on speculative topics, ranging from sci-fi to sustainable issues. Speaking of the latter, he is the founder of a local beach cleaning group and publishes his environmental advocacy via his YouTube channel *@professorlabs* and Instagram *@professor_labs*. When he's not cleaning beaches, you can find him enjoying swimming in the waves.

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